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Red Trail of No Return

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

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HI WADDIES, welcome to the bunk house! This time I am not going to invite you into our rangeland flop joint. It's too hot inside until after the evening and night breezes have cooled off the outside of the house and allowed the cool atmosphere to chase the heat away, but it is very comfortable outside the bunk house door, where we have benches underneath the old cottonwood tree in the evening breeze. Of course, we do not need the shade of the old tree after the sun has gone down.

We often sit outside the bunk house in the evening for a while and swap yarns and talk of the great western characters we have known, or have been told about by friends, and right now I have a lot to talk about, about old time friends I met on a recent trip that carried me clear through Texas. I traveled from Texarkana through Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, San Angelo, and out to El Paso, then through New Mexico, Arizona and out to California.

Puncher and Lawman

A really great western character, if not quite as famous as some of the others, is an old, old friend of nearly forty years, a typical western cowpuncher and lawman, Ed Echols.

One of the most colorful characters of the present West, this typical cowpuncher and lawman, now 71 years old, is still an active lawman, being the constable at Tucson, Arizona. Citizens and visitors who line the streets or sidewalks of Tucson during the parade of the annual Fiesta de Los Vaqueros in February of each year get a look at Ed Echols. As a cowboy he rides at the head of the cavalcade, for he has been the big boss of the annual cowboy field day for more than a quarter of a century.

A big robust fellow who has spent a great portion of his life in the saddle, he rides straight up, not like a man of seventy in a limp and stooped-like position, but sits a horse almost as perfectly as he did away back in 1912 when he journeyed from Tucson up to Canada for the first great Calgary Stampede, where he outroped such famous steer ropers as the great Henry Grammer of Kaw City, Oklahoma, Joe Gardner of Sierra Blanco, Texas, and George Weir of Monument, New Mexico. These notables and a host of lesser lights gathered there for the inauguration of what became from the very start one of the greatest cowboy contests on the North American continent.

Ed Echols, as a puncher and a lawman, has always been a good man with a gun, but a better one with a lariat. In the Calgary contest he roped, threw and tied a wild longhorn steer weighing more than a thousand pounds in 28.8 seconds, and that after giving the animal a forty-foot start, a feat that has been duplicated very few times in the 38 years since it happened.

Star of the Parade

With flags flying, bands playing, horses prancing, drum majorettes in red ballet skirts doing their gorgeous strut, clanking spurs, swishing lariats and literally hundreds of cowboys as well as young good-looking cowgirls in their colorful attire, one would think that a grizzled old man riding along in such a gay cavalcade would go almost unnoticed, but this is not so of Ed Echols.

Although he rides a beautiful Palomino, most people pay little attention to the horse, for the rider simply oozes color.

(Continued on page 8)

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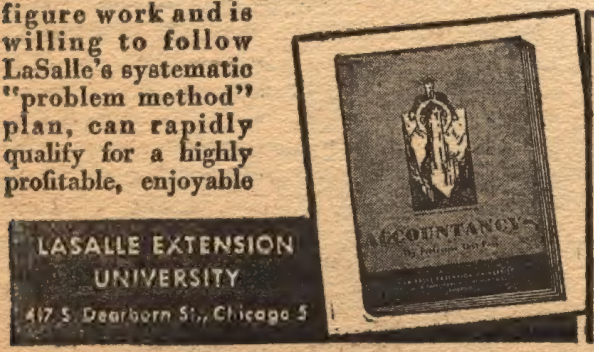

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

Strangers, if they are quick, will be asking the question, "Who is he?" But if they are not quick they need not ask, for there is always someone pointing and saying, "There goes Ed Echols." Even the gay floats, the covered wagons and horse-drawn rigs of ancient vintage, seem to fail to attract attention compared to the colorful character who heads the mile-long parade.

Ed Echols was born on a ranch near Stockdale, Wilson County, Texas, November 7th, 1879. This happened to be just three days after the birth in Oklahoma, or rather then, Indian Territory, of the great cowboy humorist Will Rogers, and the two young cowboys, born many miles apart, but only a few days apart, afterward became the staunchest of friends.

At the age of 23 he landed in Arizona, and went to punching cattle practically midway between Tucson and the once famous gunman's town Tombstone, having ridden the 900 miles in nine months, but he had not traveled continuously, as he had stopped along the way, taking jobs on ranches here and there, and remaining with those jobs until wanderlust told him to move on.

Water had flooded and closed the rich silver mines of Tombstone, the law had gotten the upper hand of the gunmen and chased them out, when Ed Echols arrived in that section, and while Tombstone and Cochise County were not making the headlines of the newspapers all over the country like they once had, the region was still wild enough so that a fellow had to watch his step to live to a ripe old age.

Unwritten Laws

Echols was not only a world's champion steer roper, but might also be classed as a champion man. His is the last of a vanishing breed. A cowman's breed, that had its unwritten laws that were mighty close to the Ten Commandments of God. They had swift, sure punishment for the violators of those unwritten rules they lived by when they crossed frontiers. They lived according to their lights, and more than a few died fighting for the unwritten laws of the pioneer West that is no more.

(Continued on page 123)

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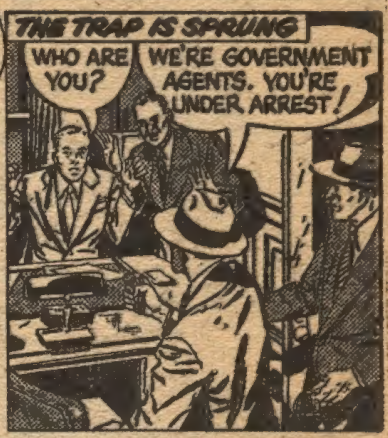

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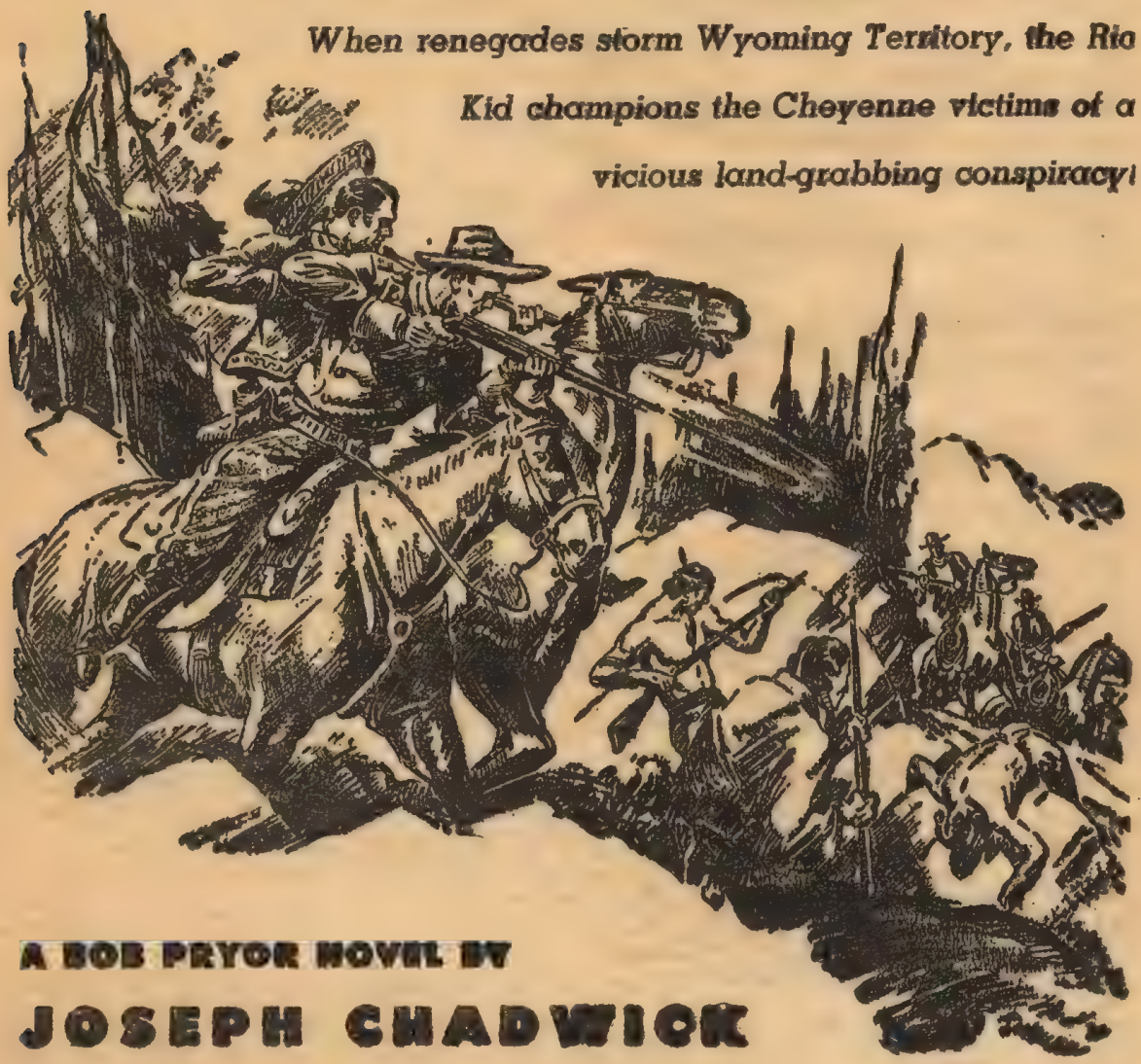
RED TRAIL OF NO RETURN

When renegades storm Wyoming Territory, the Rio Kid champions the Cheyenne victims of a vicious land-grabbing conspiracy!



A BOB PRYOR NOVEL BY

JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER I

Doublecross

ELSEWHERE the land might be good, but here, where the Cheyenne village stood, was nothing but sun-scorched wasteland. The river was bone-dry, the earth red dust. The grass grew in sparse patches, soon yellowed and burned out. The only shade was that of a few stunted blackjack pines. Hunger and disease, which these Northern Cheyennes had never known back in their homeland, the long-grass plains of Wyoming and the timbered Black Hills,

Plunder and Pillage Follow in the Tracks of

were the crops of this alien country—and the harvest was death.

Dull Knife sat alone in his tepee, alone with despair.

The once proud warrior and haughty chief was grown old. He was wrinkled of face, and in his joints was an aching stiffness. Age he could understand, but despair numbed him with utter bewilderment.

A little more than a year ago, in the spring of '77, Dull Knife had experienced defeat and surrender in battle. Since, he had experienced, with what were left of his people, imprisonment in the most barren part of the Cheyenne-Arapahoe Reservation in Indian Territory, and he knew that it would have been better if he and his people had perished in that last battle with the Yellow-Legs. Better if he had never lived to see his people starve and sicken and die.

Dull Knife's people were a hunting people, and here there was no game—no buffalo, no deer, no antelope. The only food was rationed to them at the Darlington Agency, and the rations were not sufficient to keep body and soul together.

Dull Knife's people were also a proud people, and it shamed them to be handed food, short in quantity and poor in quality, when they were still capable of hunting. They had been good hunters, fierce warriors, a free people, but the white men who were agents for something called the Government were determined to humble them. It was easy to hate a proud people, perhaps. Dull Knife thought of that as he sat wrapped in his despair, and, in an old man's way, looked back to the day when the Cheyennes, his Northern Cheyennes, the Dog Soldiers, the tallest of the plains Indians, wore their pride like a banner.

The entrance to the tepee was suddenly shadowed.

Dull Knife looked up and saw his nephew, called Nanatahe in the Cheyenne tongue, enter. Nanatahe stood well over six feet in height, but his body, naked except for loin cloth, was so wasted away by hunger that his ribs showed through his coppery hide. He had bold features, a handsome face, and fierce eyes. Nanatahe was a member of the society called the Dog Soldiers, which were the tribe police, and thus a proved brave. Dull Knife looked up at him with an old man's envy for youth.

"What is it?" the old man asked.

"The sun is here," Nanatahe replied, gesturing. "It is time to go."

The tongue of the Cheyennes was an abundant and beautiful language, but sick and hungry men could find few words. Dull Knife merely nodded, said, "I come," and the young Dog Soldier silently withdrew.

Dull Knife rose and, despite the great heat, wrapped his blanket about himself. The old were never too warm, and the Indian, upon despairing, always went back to his blanket. Dull Knife emerged from his tepee, to mount his horse.

From all about the village, his people watched him with silent pity. Even the naked children gazed at him with something like compassion. He turned his spotted pony through the three-quarter circle of tepees, with Nanatahe, also mounted now, following, and saw Little Wolf come from his tepee.

Little Wolf, too, was a chief, and old.

BUT he was not so old as Dull Knife, and despair had not yet taken hold of him. He was short for a Cheyenne, and a decided stoop to his thick shoulders made him appear even less tall. His face was handsome in a craggy way; the nose was curved, the jaw huge, the mouth wide. His eyes were small, deep-set, and myriad wrinkles radiated from them. They were wise eyes, and at the moment, looking at the mounted Dull Knife, not unkind. He had a clean look, a calm look, an imposing look. Now, in the winter of their lives, Little Wolf not Dull Knife was the chief who was not weakened or humbled. Little Wolf stepped forward, raising his right arm, and Dull Knife reined in.

the Great Indian Hegira to the Black Hills!

"More talk with the white men will gain nothing, my friend," Little Wolf said softly. "No Cheyenne ever gained anything by talking with men of white skin. You will have your ride in the sun for nothing."

Dull Knife looked beyond Little Wolf and saw Tangle Hair, chief of the Dog Soldiers, squatting in the shade of Little Wolf's tepee. He knew that those two had put their heads together, each looking into the other's heart, and made up their minds to leave the reservation. Dull Knife almost sighed.

"I go to try once more," he said. "This white man can be trusted."

"Is he so different?" asked Little Wolf. "This white man called the Rio Kid?"

Dull Knife caught the mild scorn behind the other chief's words, and a sudden anger pushed through his despair to flash in his eyes. "You listen to the words of a white man!" he said. It was an accusation.

"A white man we Cheyennes know."

"A trader! Not even white men trust a trader!"

"Chris Burrell lived among us," Little Wolf said tolerantly. "He never betrayed us when we went to his trading post in the Powder River Country. But this man called the Rio Kid—"

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR

Dull Knife gestured impatiently.

"Word of him has spread from tribe to tribe," he broke in, "and even you have heard it. The Rio Kid is a Longknife, a Yellow-Leg, but he follows his own heart, which is good, and not the orders of men who have no feeling for us. The Sioux know of him, and the far-off Apaches. He had been among the Comanches, and with the Utes. They speak of him softly. They say that evil whites hate him. He cares not for profit, like this Trader Burrell who has your ear. If I gain nothing by seeing him, still I can lose nothing. I go."

Little Wolf said no more, but stepped back.

The Rio Kid and Celestino rode up on Burrell and Rigby (Chap. XV)

Dull Knife rode on with Nanatahe close behind him. The old chief tried not to see the hungry faces of his people, or to hear from some of the lodges the delirious voices of those down with malaria. But it was not in him to be blind and deaf to suffering. At the stick-and-brush corral outside the circle of tepees, a rider joined Dull Knife and Nanatahe. He was Charlie Dobe, a half-breed Arapahoe. It had been through the breed that Dull Knife had contacted Captain Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, and he would now act as interpreter.

The three rode slowly east, across red-dust flats and rocky ridges, then descended a slope toward a little patch of green. This was the rendezvous—a clump of blackjacks by a tiny stream, and grass fringing the creek-banks.

They saw no signs of the man they were to meet, but then a horse hidden among the pines whinnied. Dull Knife roused himself from his bleak thoughts.

"He has come," he murmured, "It is good."

Nanatahe suddenly swung up alongside the old chief.

"I do not like this," he said flatly. "Why would a friend stay hidden?"

His answer came not from Dull Knife but from the blackjacks.

It was the crack of a rifle.

The slug tore through Dull Knife's blanket, causing the old chief to grunt with alarm. The Arapahoe half-breed uttered a white man's oath, dropped from his horse, dived for the cover of a boulder. Nanatahe held his rifle ready, swung in front of Dull Knife, and when the next shots came—three shots fired together—the Dog Soldier took the slugs in his own body to save the chief.

DULL KNIFE saw the brave crumple, fall forward over his pony's shoulder, spill loosely to the ground. He knew that the shots had been fired at him, and that the Dog Soldier had deliberately made himself the target. Grief and rage filled Dull Knife's breast. Moving swiftly for so old a man, he dismounted from his spooked horse and grabbed up the rifle that had fallen from Nanatahe's hand. He, too, took cover behind a rock and, levering a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber, he

faced the blackjacks. And the guns hidden there were still blasting. Slugs thudded against the rock behind which Dull Knife crouched. Some shrieked loudly as they ricocheted off the boulder. The ambushers did not shoot at Charlie Dobe, who huddled behind his boulder in unconcealed terror, but concentrated upon Dull Knife.

Whoever they were, they wanted Dull Knife's life.

And the old man was willing for them to have it. Such a death was to be preferred to that stalking the village.

But before he died there, Dull Knife wanted partially to avenge Nanatahe's death. He began to shoot with a skill that came of a lifetime of warfare. But his sight was dim and the targets hidden. Dull Knife feared that Nanatahe would be unavenged.

CHAPTER II

Rio Kid to the Rescue

PUFFS of red dust blossomed from under the horses' shod hoofs, and hung in the still air as though reluctant to settle back upon the sun-baked earth. The two riders with the spare horse under pack squinted against the sun's relentless glare, and tilted their hats forward so that their eyes were further shielded.

The heat was a weight upon men and animals, and under the burden they traveled slowly. They came from the direction of Fort Reno and, being strangers to the Indian Territory, they made their way by landmarks that had been described to them—a jutting rock spire, a bald ridge, a dry-creek bed.

Landmarks in this country, a barren country, were harsh and ugly. It was a wasteland. Mile after mile, there was no sign of life. It was a shimmering bowl under the molten sun in a brassy sky, and the quivering heat haze distorted every distant point of the desolate landscape.

The two riders sought a hollow in which, they had been told, was a small creek and a clump of blackjack pines.

Captain Robert Pryor, known throughout the West since the end of the Civil War as the Rio Kid, turned in the saddle.

"This country is worse than I expected," he said.

"*Si*," murmured Pryor's trailmate, Celestino Mireles. He had to lick parched lips before saying more. "*Si*, General," he then added. "It is what you say? *Uno infierno en la tierra.*"

Hell on earth.

Pryor nodded. That described this country, and for the Government, through the officials of the Indian Bureau, to force the Northern Cheyennes to live here was nothing more or less than imprisoning them to a hell on earth. It was a dry sinkhole in the Indian Territory, and life could not exist here for long.

Mireles, who had been riding slightly behind the Rio Kid, now swung alongside. The young Mexican rode with the easy skill of a *vaquero*. He was mounted on a black gelding, a fine figure of a man in the rather flamboyant attire of his race.

The black was easily managed, but its presence caused Pryor's mouse-colored dun to grow skittish. The dun's reaction to the nearness of another horse was always violent. Saber, as Pryor called his rather unhandsome war horse, became wall-eyed and bared his wicked teeth and rippled the black stripe along his back—ready to fight. Man or animal, except for its rider, Saber was hostile to them all.

But now a low-voiced command from the Rio Kid restrained the dun immediately. Saber accepted the black, and also the pinto pack mare which Mireles led, with reluctance.

Pryor and Saber seemed to have been born to trouble. Certainly, they thrived on gunsmoke. They had survived the War by some miracle, not through any

consideration for self-preservation. As a cavalry officer in the Union Army, Bob Pryor had served under such generals as Grant, Sheridan, and the reckless Custer. Often he had been sent on special missions, under secret orders. He had flirted with death time and again, often risked capture. He had been a dashing officer, and as reckless a campaigner as any blue or gray-eyed son of Texas who had been forced by conscience to make the difficult choice between state and country.

At war's end, Pryor had been at loose ends and his abundant energy had kept him from settling down. He had found his native Texas under the heel of Yankee carpet-baggers, returned Unionists, and plain renegades. He had discovered that his parents had been victims of treacherous Border-jumping riff-raff, and he had sworn by their graves that he would devote his life to fighting evil.

He had helped restore Texas to native Texans, and afterward the vengeance trail had led him all across the Frontier beyond the Missouri to the Pacific, from the Mexican border to the Canadian, and he had come to be known as the Rio Kid. He was a restless spirit in quest of endless adventure, a product of war, but men who knew him said:

"Some like him turned bad. But the Rio Kid will do to ride the river with."

A HANDSOME man, Pryor was typically the cavalryman in size and weight, and in his blue eyes glinted his devil-may-care spirit. He had sharply chiseled features, an engaging smile, and decent men found him likable. He clung to Army ways, and Army dress. The cavalry's yellow stripe edged the seams of his breeches, his shirt was Army blue. His military-style boots were always highly polished, and his chestnut-hued hair beneath the cavalryman's campaign hat was close-cropped in military fashion.

Crossed cartridge belts carried two holstered Colts, and another brace of revolvers rode in special holsters beneath Pryor's shirt. He was an expert with firearms but not a glory-seeking gunfighter. Iron of nerves, steady of judgment, Bob Pryor was the friend of the Frontier's ablest men. The Rio Kid knew the famous and the notorious, but humble men, too, could claim him as a *compadre*.

Celestino Mireles was Pryor's closest friend, however. The Spanish strain was strong in Mireles; his boldly handsome features hinted at patrician forbears. His eyes were dark, his hair black. He wore a high-peaked sombrero, a braided *chaqueta*, laced *calzoneras*—tight-fitting trousers that flared at the bottom—of black velvet, a brilliant red sash, and boots of embossed leather. His spurs were of silver, and the same precious metal decorated his saddle and bridle. Mireles, too, was well armed. He carried a long knife and a pair of revolvers in his sash and, like the Rio Kid, he was formidable in a fight.

His parents too had been murdered by Border renegades, and Bob Pryor had rescued Mireles himself from a band of outlaws. Since that day, the pair had been inseparable comrades and had risked death innumerable times together. The young Mexican believed Bob Pryor to be a great soldier, one rating the highest rank, and when he called Pryor "General" or "*General mio*" it was not lightly.

They had ridden some little distance in silence after Mireles's comment about the country, and now he said soberly:

"Ees easy to see why there ees trouble here. Nobody could keep us in this *malpais*. Eh, General?"

Pryor nodded, his bronzed face solemn.

"I shore don't blame the Cheyennes for wanting to jump the reservation," he said. "What surprises me is that they stayed so long without tryin' to pull out."

"The soldiers keep them here, I theenk."

"So far, yes."

"But no longer, maybe?"

"The officers at Fort Reno are uneasy," Pryor admitted. "They're afraid the Cheyennes will pull out—which will lead to a bloody fight."

It troubled him, though most men would have said that it concerned the Rio Kid not at all. The matter was, of course, one to be handled by the Darlington Agency and the soldiers at Reno. But Pryor knew that too often Indian Agents were bunglers, and he was well aware that the Army usually settled disputes with disgruntled tribesmen with force of arms.

Eli Matthews, the agent at Darlington, antagonized the Northern Cheyennes, and the military was already preparing for an "incident." A troop of cavalry was already marching toward Darlington. But the Rio Kid never failed to involve himself in trouble when called upon for help by worthy people. He had decided to meet and talk with Dull Knife after the Arapahoe half-breed, Charlie Dobe, brought him the old chief's message.

However, he was not acting secretly. He had told Captain Mowbrey, in command of the cavalry now on the way to Darlington, that he was riding to a rendezvous with Dull Knife. Mowbrey, a fine officer, had not protested. He had expressed a hope that Pryor could influence Dull Knife not to "do anything foolhardy."

The two riders with the pack horse rounded a rocky slope and saw the rendezvous spot, a clump of blackjacks, half a mile away.

And heard racketing rifle fire.

SABER caught the sound and began a skittish prancing. Pryor reached into his saddle-bag, brought out a pair of Army field-glasses. Focusing the binoculars upon the blackjacks, the Rio Kid saw a cloud of powder smoke hanging in the still air above the scrub pines and a second such cloud wafting up from a boulder a hundred yards from the trees. He saw a figure sprawled on the ground near the boulder. A copper-skinned figure that was naked except for breech-clout, moccasins, and a single feather in the dead Indian's hair.

He shifted the glasses to the trees again, and made out three figures crouching in the clump. They were white men, and they were keeping up a heavy fire on whoever fought from behind the boulder.

Three horses were tethered among the blackjacks.

Three Indian ponies stood dejectly in the open, off from the trees and the boulder.

"What happens, General?" Mireles said anxiously.

Pryor lowered the glasses, thrust them back into the saddle-bag, and pulled his rifle from its saddle scabbard.

"Dull Knife has been bushwhacked," he said harshly. "Mebbe killed. I saw one dead Indian. But another Cheyenne is still fightin' the bushwhackers. Come on! We'll give him a hand!"

The Rio Kid let Saber out, and the striped dun, one of the "breed that never dies," needed no guiding hand on the reins. The horse shrilled and headed at a gallop toward the crashing guns and powdersmoke. It was his life, trained as he was as the Rio Kid's war horse in the war so recently over.

Mireles followed, leaving the pack mare to trail along behind, but he was outdistanced by the Rio Kid. The Mexican's black, good saddler though it was, could not keep up with the dun war horse. The Rio Kid let Saber have his head, having knotted the reins, and so had both hands free for his rifle.

He fired a wild shot to distract the bushwhackers, to draw their fire away from their quarry behind the boulder. He was successful in that, for no sooner had his slug ripped through the blackjacks than the three ambushers were alerted. Pryor saw—since he was rapidly drawing close—their confusion.

He saw, too, that they were shaggily bearded and roughly garbed, and he thought, "Hide-hunters!"

Then they opened fire on him. There was the roar of a Sharps buffalo gun and the lighter crack of two Winchesters. The Rio Kid was shooting, too. This time to kill.

He was expert at shooting from the saddle as Saber raced along, and on his second shot, the first missing, he saw one of the bushwhackers double over

and pitch to the ground. His third shot staggered another, then that one turned and fled toward the tethered horses. His fellow squeezed out another shot at the Rio Kid, then lost his nerve and ran. They jerked their mounts' reins loose, leaped to saddle, and spurred away through the trees.

Pryor missed another shot, but as the pair broke from the blackjacks Mireles targeted one of them. The bushwhacker flung up his arms, lost his rifle, then toppled loosely over the rump of his galloping horse. He hit the ground in a heap and did not move again. The one survivor struck out over the rocky flat as fast as his horse would go, with Mireles's slugs shrieking about him. The Rio Kid left that one to his trail mate, and swung his dun toward the other side of the blackjacks.

An old Indian rose from behind the boulder.

Pryor knew that it was Dull Knife.

A moment later another figure ventured from behind another rock. Pryor recognized him as the Arapahoe half-breed, Charlie Dobe.

Pryor booted his rifle, raised his empty right hand in the customary gesture of peace. Dull Knife shifted his weapon to the crook of his left arm, and imitated the Rio Kid's gesture. Pryor had learned from Captain Mowbrey that Little Wolf spoke some English, but that Dull Knife required an interpreter. He regretted that, for he knew from past dealings with Indians that meanings were often lost or confused when speech was translated through a third person. And this Charlie Dobe, with his shifty eyes and sly look, did not strike Pryor as too trustworthy.

DULL KNIFE began to speak, and the Rio Kid caught the despair and grief in his old voice. Charlie Dobe was attentive, and translated after the Rio Kid dismounted. The half-breed told the Rio Kid in clumsy English that Dull Knife welcomed him, extended undying gratitude for his driving off the ambushers, and believed, as he had heard, that the Rio Kid was a mighty warrior.

The Rio Kid swung Saber around and faced the oncoming five (Chap. XII)

"Dull Knife's heart is sad," Charlie Dobe ended up. "He is sad for his people. They want to return to their homeland in the Powder River country, because here they die like flies."

"I understand," said Pryor. "What does Dull Knife want of me?"

The question was put to the old chief. The answer came.

"Dull Knife wants the Rio Kid to get permission from the Government for the Cheyennes to return home—in peace."

Bob Pryor had no immediate reply to that. He realized that Dull Knife had heard that the Rio Kid occasionally helped persecuted people and so, believing, Indian-fashion, that such a man must be a powerful chief, was convinced that the Rio Kid had great influence if not vast authority.

Pryor kept his face expressionless, for Dull Knife was watching him closely and shrewdly. The old chief would note at once that he was asking the impossible, just by seeing what thoughts the Rio Kid's face reflected. And Pryor was not sure that it was impossible to do as Dull Knife asked. He merely needed time to think it over.

"It's a matter that must be considered," he said. When the half-breed interpreted that to the Indian, Pryor went on, "I want to know what happened here. Why did those three white men ambush Dull Knife?"

CHAPTER III

A Promise from the Heart

THE old chief, through the interpreter, talked at great length.

As the Rio Kid understood it, from what Charlie Dobe said, Dull Knife did not know why the attempt had been made upon him. There were, of course, many white men who hated the Cheyennes. Perhaps those three felt that they had a score to settle with the tribesmen; some men hold a grudge until blood wipes out blood.

Too, Indian Territory was overrun with bad white men. They fled there when the law made things hot for them, and went into hiding. Some were horse thieves and rustlers, some bandits, some killers. There were traders who smuggled cheap whisky onto the reservations and sold it to the Indians. Others came seeking women; they took squaws by force.

Now that the buffalo herds were all gone, the hide-hunters—and all Indians hated the hide-hunters for their slaughter of buffalo—were like lobo wolves. No, Dull Knife did not know why he had been attacked from ambush. But Nanatahe, the Dog Soldier, was dead there in the red dust.

Celestino Mireles returned as Charlie Dobe was making the interpretation, and when the Rio Kid turned to him, he reported:

"One got away, General. He had a good horse and fear to outrun me. But the one El General shot in the blackjacks is not yet dead. Maybe he will talk."

Pryor nodded. "Mebbe he will, at that," he muttered.

He turned and strode toward the trees, and it was a relief to step from the scorching sunlight into the shade. But the man lying among the blackjacks was in a deeper shade, the shadow of death. Pryor saw that at once. His face was already ashen behind the rust-red beard. He wore a dirty gray shirt that was now blood-stained, smoke-blackened buckskin breeches, muleskinner's flat-heeled boots. His unkempt red hair was almost shoulder length. He stared up at Pryor with dull eyes.

Mireles, Dull Knife, and Charlie Dobe had followed the Rio Kid.

"I know this hombre," the half-breed muttered. "He is Jake Duval."

Pryor knelt beside the dying man. "Duval, listen," he said, not unkindly. "Yuh're going to cash in your chips. You'd better ease your conscience.

Why'd you and the other two bushwhack those Cheyennes?"

Duval's breathing was fluttery. "Water!" he gasped.

Mireles fetched the canteen he carried on his saddle while riding this parched country. He handed it to Pryor, who raised the wounded man's shoulders and head so that he could drink. Duval sighed heavily after quenching his thirst.

"Don't leave me till I—I'm gone," he managed to say, like a beggar.

Pryor nodded, then asked again, "Why'd you and the other two bushwhack those Cheyennes?"

Duval seemed not to understand. He was that far gone. But after a lengthy moment he whispered:

"We were stony broke. A hombre at Fort Reno offered us some money. He wanted old Dull Knife dead."

"What's this hombre's name?"

"Burrell."

"Why does he want Dull Knife dead, Duval?"

Jake Duval began to strangle. His body writhed, his fingers clawed at the earth. After a moment the spasm passed. He lay limp, his breathing shallow. He began to talk again, in a whisper no louder than a sigh. The Rio Kid leaned close, and was surprised to hear the bushwhacker repeating a prayer. A child's prayer. A strange thing, a dying man's memory.

Finally Duval was silent and still, in a coma. The end was near, and it was going to be a peaceful one despite the wound that was its cause. The Rio Kid rose, his face grave. After a time, he turned to Charlie Dobe.

"Ask if Dull Knife knows a man named Burrell."

The half-breed put the question into Cheyenne, and the old chief nodded vigorously. Dull Knife looked excited, and began to talk heatedly. Charlie Dobe began to interpret before Dull Knife had finished his harangue.

"He knows. White man. Trader. Chris Burrell." The breed held up his hands clasped tightly. "Burrell and Little Wolf are friends, blood brothers. Burrell had a trading-post"—he gestured toward the north—"Powder River country. Long time. Many years. Little Wolf was there, and some white men came. There was trouble, and Burrell saved Little Wolf's life."

DULL KNIFE'S excitement had been communicated to the half-breed Arapahoe, and Charlie was talking in guttural tones that were difficult to understand. But Bob Pryor followed the main point of it. Chris Burrell was the only white man Little Wolf trusted.

On the other hand, Dull Knife had never trusted Burrell at all. Burrell had shown up in Indian Territory about ten days ago, saying that he wanted to help Little Wolf and the Cheyennes. The man had been urging Little Wolf to jump the reservation and lead the Cheyennes back to their historic homeland.

"Dull Knife no like," Charlie Dobe ended up. "He told Little Wolf it means trouble. Soldiers follow. There be one bad fight, with many Cheyennes killed. Cheyennes brought back. Men sent to prison at Dry Tortugas. Bad, Dull Knife say."

The Rio Kid nodded. He looked at old Dull Knife.

"So Chris Burrell gives Little Wolf bad advice," he said gravely, "and then sends men to bushwhack you because you argue against the Cheyennes jumpin' the reservation. What reason can Burrell have for wantin' the Cheyennes to go back to their old home?"

Charlie Dobe put the question to the chief.

Dull Knife shook his head.

"Burrell's heart is bad," was his reply. "His mind works in dark ways. No Cheyenne—not even Little Wolf—knows what he plans. But he means no good for my people. That is as sure as tomorrow's sun!"

Pryor was silent for a time, thoughtful. He was puzzled by Burrell's interest in the Cheyennes, but he was sure that the man did not have the Indians' own good at heart. Burrell's having sent the bushwhackers to make an attempt on Dull Knife's life was the work of a

treacherous man, not that of one kindly disposed toward a suffering people who looked upon Dull Knife as a leader. Chris Burrell needed investigating, but that was less important than the old chief's plea for help—from the Rio Kid.

"I can promise nothing," the Rio Kid said finally, "but I will try to help. I was on my way to Kansas to meet a friend when I got Dull Knife's message. My friend is an official of the Government in Washington. A chief."

He waited until that was interpreted to Dull Knife, then he went on:

"My friend's name is Langford—Senator Langford. During the war between the white men of the North and the South, he was a great soldier. He is an honest man. I will appeal to him. I will ask him to use his influence with the Government to have the Cheyennes returned to Wyoming—in peace."

"So be it," Dull Knife replied.

"I can promise no more."

"It is better to promise little and give much," the old chief replied, through the interpreter, "than to promise much and give little."

"I advise Dull Knife," Pryor added, "to hold his people here in Indian Territory until he hears from me."

"I will do my best," the Cheyenne said solemnly.

Handshaking was not an Indian ritual, but Dull Knife now offered his hand to the Rio Kid. Immediately afterward, he turned away. He and Charlie Dobe caught up the three ponies. They lifted the body of the slain Dog Soldier onto one pony, tied it securely, then mounted their own animals. Leading the pony with its lifeless burden, they headed slowly west.

"General—"

Pryor turned from watching the departing Dull Knife. Celestino Mireles was kneeling by Jake Duval.

"Thees one ees gone, General," he said softly.

It was true. Duval was dead. He had died without a final sound or struggle.

"We'll leave him and the other one as they are," Pryor said. "Their *compadres* who escaped can come back and bury them."

HE turned abruptly, walked from the blackjacks to his horse. He mounted, turned Saber after the pinto pack mare which was grazing on the short grass by the little creek. Shortly, he and Mireles rode out. They headed southwest, Pryor intending to intercept the troop of cavalry now on the way to the Darlington Agency.

"One wonders, General," Mireles said, after a time, "how those three bushwhackers knew that Dull Knife would show up at those blackjacks."

The Rio Kid nodded. "I've been wonderin' about that, too," he said flatly. "There's only one explanation. After that half-breed gave me Dull Knife's message at Fort Reno, he went to the sutler's store. There were a dozen civilian white men at the sutlery. Chris Burrell must have been among them—and questioned Charlie."

"Maybe Little Wolf told Burrell, General?"

"I doubt it. One Cheyenne wouldn't betray another."

"We will have a talk with this Senor Burrell, maybe?"

"There's no time for us to deal with him," Pryor replied. "We've got to make tracks for Dodge City, now that I've given my word to Dull Knife. I'll let the Army handle Burrell."

An hour later, at nearly sundown, the two riders topped a low rise and saw the blue-clad cavalrymen traveling slowly along the Fort Reno-Darlington Agency road. A buckboard and team was with the troop, and two civilians occupied the rig. Captain Mowbrey halted the column upon seeing Captain Bob Pryor and his companion approaching.

Mowbrey was a stout man of about forty, and he had a fair complexion that the plains country sun and wind reddened but never darkened. He and Pryor exchanged casual salutes, just as though Pryor were still in the Service.

"You saw Dull Knife, Captain?" Mowbrey asked at once.

"Yes, I saw him," Pryor said gravely.

When with Army men or others of high degree he always dropped his more characteristic Texas drawl.

He was looking at the two men in the buckboard. The driver was the black-bearded Eli Matthews, Indian Agent at Darlington, and he had halted with the soldiers. His companion was a swarthy man with a long, angular face and beady black eyes. Like Matthews, he was dressed in black and, despite the heat, had his coat on. He was a stranger to the Rio Kid.

"I urged Dull Knife to keep his people on the reservation," Pryor went on, looking at Mowbrey again. "I gave him my promise that I'd talk to Senator Langford—I'm meeting him in Dodge City—about having the Cheyennes moved back to Wyoming."

"That'll take some doing, Pryor," Mowbrey said.

"Langford has a lot of influence in Washington."

"I hope he makes good use of it," the Army officer said. "If the Northern Cheyennes were sent back to their homeland, it would save the Army—at least at Reno—a lot of grief." He glanced at the Indian Agent. "And you too, eh, Matthews?"

Eli Matthews pulled at his beard and looked as though he didn't know what to say. Like most Indian Agents he was an Easterner, and he possessed little true knowledge of Indian affairs. His uncertainty at the moment was easily understood. Like the more tractable Arapahoes and Southern Cheyennes, Dull Knife's tribemen were his charges. Any expression of relief over the prospect of having the Northern Cheyennes removed from the reservation would have seemed like an admission of failure on his part. Matthews did not want to admit that he could not handle the Northern Cheyennes.

"As you know, sir," he said solemnly, "rations for my Agency have been cut, not increased, since the arrival of the Northern Cheyennes. Matters might improve if there were fewer mouths to feed." Matthews' companion was lighting a cigar.

CELESTINO MIRELES

"Captain," Pryor said, "when Mireles and I neared the rendezvous spot, we heard gunfire. Dull Knife was bein' fired on from ambush by three white men, and our arrival saved him from bein' killed. A Dog Soldier with Dull Knife was shot down."

Captain Mowbrey looked startled, and swore under his breath.

"I shot down one of the bushwhackers," Pryor went on, "and Mireles killed another. The third got away. The one I shot took some time in cashing in his chips. And he talked."

"Go on, Pryor," Mowbrey ordered.

"His name was Jake Duval."

"I know him. What was he up to? What did he say?"

"He claimed that a man named Chris Burrell offered him and his friends money to kill Dull Knife."

MOWBREY swore again. He gigged his mount about and lay an angry look on Eli Matthews' companion. Matthews, too, stared at the other civilian, shocked.

"What have you got to say for yourself, Mr. Burrell?" Mowbrey snapped.

Pryor's glance bored at the swarthy civilian.

"So he's Burrell!" he muttered.

He saw that the man was calmly puffing on his cigar, smiling thinly, wholly

unruffled. In fact, he seemed to sneer, and he talked around his cigar.

"I've nothing to say for myself, Captain. But I will say that the charges are false, that somebody—either this Pryor or Duval—is lying. I wouldn't pay to have a man, not even an Indian, killed. I'm a poor man. I haven't that kind of money. And I've proved, by trying to have the lot of the Northern Cheyennes made better, that I'm their friend."

Pryor frowned. It was a glib speech, and Chris Burrell was a smooth one.

"I don't like being called a liar, Burrell," Pryor said. "My word has never been doubted, as Captain Mowbrey well knows. And a dying man seldom lies. You hired Duval and his friends to kill Dull Knife."

"It's ridiculous," said Burrell. "What reason would I have?"

"You want the Cheyennes to jump the reservation," Pryor retorted. "You've urged Little Wolf to do just that, and yuh know that Dull Knife is against it. Beyond that, I don't know what yuh're up to. But yuh can count on it, mister, I'm goin' to find out!"

CHAPTER IV

Forlorn Hope

CHRIS BURRELL spat contemptuously, put his cigar back into his mouth. "Captain," he said to Mowbrey, "as I understand it, this man is no longer holding a commission in the Army. I question his right to meddle in the affairs of any Indians held upon a reservation."

"You have a point there, Burrell," Mowbrey said flatly. "But the accusation was made against you, not against Captain Pryor. I'm placing you under arrest—until I get to the bottom of this bushwhacking."

"You're making a mistake, Mowbrey," Burrell said sharply. "You have Pryor's word against mine, nothing more."

"I'll find something more, blast it!"

"Just what, Captain?"

"Duval rode out of Reno last night with Matt Rigby and Ed Tulsa," Mowbrey snapped shortly. "One of those two survived the fight, according to Pryor, and I'll have a talk with him. I'll throw him into the guardhouse until he does talk, and if he says that you hired him—well, you'll be in a mighty tight spot, mister!"

Burrell continued to puff on his cigar, but he no longer looked so sure of himself. There was a trace of uneasiness in his beady eyes.

"It will inconvenience me—nothing more," he said flatly. "I did not hire those men to kill Dull Knife." He paused, gave Bob Pryor a bitter look. "I'll not forget this, Pryor," he said. "Be assured of that."

Mowbrey motioned to his lieutenant, told him to put a trooper to keeping Burrell under constant surveillance, then rode a little distance away with the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles.

"What do you figure he's up to, Pryor?" he asked.

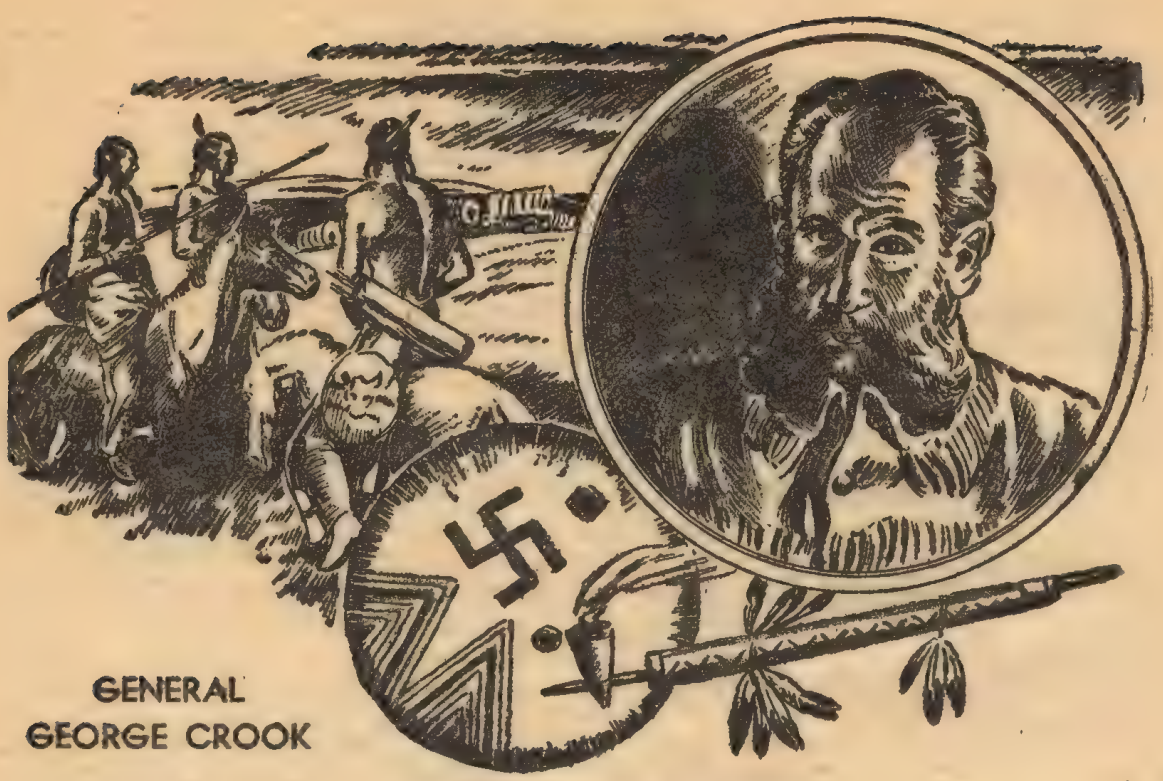
"I can't even guess."

"I don't like him, and I didn't trust him from the first time I met him," Mowbrey said. "But he's friendly with some of the Cheyennes, just like he claims. I'll try to sweat something out of him."

Pryor nodded. "Mind telling me what your orders are, Captain?"

Mowbrey shrugged. "They're no secret. I'm to see that the Cheyennes don't move out. Three braves did jump the reservation. Matthews heard it from some Arapahoes. He came to Fort Reno and asked the C. O. to send troops. He claims to be a man of peace, but he's sure quick to call for force. His idea is to arrest ten braves and hold them as hostages until the three who pulled out come back. It's a crazy idea. I don't fancy it. You don't just up and arrest Dog Soldiers. They don't easily submit to arrest."

He was silent for a time, then said



GENERAL
GEORGE CROOK

GENERAL George Crook was one of the finest soldiers who ever served in the Army of the United States, but he never held the limelight like some less able officers. Sherman praised him as the "greatest Indian fighter." Crook was a West Pointer and had a fine Civil War record. But he was no martinet. He seldom wore a uniform in the field, wearing instead a plain hunting suit and often a British-type sun helmet. He neither smoked nor drank, and never grew profane. But he was tough, and the hardiest of enlisted men respected him—while the Indians called him, for his cunning, The Gray Fox.

He had no hatred for the Indian. He understood the redman's position, and once said, "The American Indian commands respect for his rights only so long as he inspires terror for his rifle." Yet it was Crook who first defeated the Apaches and helped avenge Custer's tragic defeat by compaigning against the Sioux and the Cheyennes.

His long career as a soldier ended in 1886 after his second campaign against the Apaches. He asked to be relieved of his command after accepting the surrender of Geronimo in good faith, only to have that "worst of all Indians" break his word and again turn bronc. Crook's failure to apprehend Little Wolf's band of Northern Cheyennes during the last quarter of 1878, when he had 12,000 troops in his command, was his only defeat.

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fervently, "I hope you can get somewhere with Senator Langford, Pryor. I'd like to see these Indians moved from this hell-hole. I've been in Indian country ever since the end of the War, and I'm telling you that I'm mighty sick of fighting the poor devils. If you can help this tribe—" Mowbrey grinned, almost boyishly—"I'll see that there's a monument erected to your memory when you pass on to the Happy Hunting Ground."

Pryor laughed.

They shook hands, then parted.

Mowbrey went back to his troop, to lead it into a bloody fight perhaps. The Rio Kid headed north with his partner, Mireles, toward Dodge City, Kansas, on a mission that had only a wobbly hope to back it up.

The trail led north across the undulating plains beyond the Cheyenne-Arapahoe Reservation, and the two riders

made their night camp, as darkness came, on the bank of the shallow Cimarron. They headed out in the gray dawn, after a quick breakfast, and an hour later, as the sun rose, passed a Texas trail herd bound for Dodge. They loped by the Texas riders and the strung-out longhorn cattle through a cloud of dust. In the clear again, they slowed to a walk that was easier on their horses.

They had a long way to go.

At mid-day Pryor and Mireles sighted a band of Indians closing in on a small herd of buffalo, and later passed a party of white hide-hunters with two wagons still empty. Buffalo were scarce. The last big kill was over, and never again—though there were still men, red and white, who refused to believe it—would the great herds thunder across the prairies.

THE slaughter by the white hide-hunters had been enormous, and the plains were littered with bones and skulls. Already the bone-gatherers were at work. The two riders saw two men loading a huge freight wagon with bones, just south of the Kansas border.

"What they do with the buffalo bones, General?" Celéstino Mireles asked.

"Ship 'em to fertilizer plants in the East, *amigo*."

"A poor way to make a stake, eh?"

Pryor nodded, but knew that the real waste had been done in the ruthless slaughtering of the great shaggy beasts for their hides alone. He had little respect for men who destroyed the country's resources, and the great herds had been valuable when permitted to renew themselves. The buffalo meant life—food, clothing, tepee coverings—for the thousands of plains Indians, and now the redmen had to depend upon rations from the Government. Pryor could not justify the slaughter.

They reached Coldwater, finally, a rowdy trail town just across the Kansas line. They spent a night there, then trailed northwest toward notorious Dodge City.

There was a story that a drunken cowboy had boarded a train at a whistle stop and, handing the conductor some money, said, "Me, I want to go to hell," and the conductor had replied, without even a ghost of a grin, "The fare's one dollar, friend. Get off at Dodge."

Dodge was a rip-roaring town.

It was the end of the trail for the hands bringing herds up from Texas, and was sometimes called the cowboy capital of the world. It was the heart of the now all but vanished buffalo country. The hide-hunters brought their catch there, exchanged hides for money, and squandered their money in the saloons, honky-tonks and gambling-houses along Front Street.

Sportsmen from the East, and even from Europe, came there for the hunting—and continued to come, despite the scarcity of game. The hardcases ended up there, and the tinhorns came, too. And the gay ladies of Dodge were talked about as far as a thousand trail-miles away.

It was a railroad town, and a freighting town. Nearby was Fort Dodge, and soldiers from the post helped swell Dodge's restless throngs at night. Every man wore a gun at his thigh, and most wore spurs on their boots. They were wild and tough, and the town itself was like its people. It had two cemeteries, and in Boot Hill were buried the men who died with their boots on, and rated no coffins.

It was as wild as a prairie wolf, and it howled every night and all night long. And the law was elastic, lenient, if not on occasion blind. It often looked the other way. And the law at the moment, when Bob Pryor and Celestino Mireles rode in, that sundown, was Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson.

A string of freight wagons stood along Front Street, the muleskinners probably in the Long Branch, the Alamo, or one of the numerous other saloons to "likker up" before starting the outfit to North Kansas. A freight train was just chugging away, eastbound. Riders were coming in from every direction, now that the day was nearly over and the town was really coming alive. Hundreds of men crowded Front Street,

milling about, loud in their talk and boisterous with their laughter.

In Dodge were no homes, no family dwellings. Its buildings were all business places, and they were rickety buildings of unpainted plank. Beyond the Lady Gay Theater was the Kansas House, and before it Bob Pryor reined in.

He dismounted, told Mireles to wait, and entered the hotel. Half a dozen men loitered in the lobby, and there was a skinny, pale-faced youth serving as clerk behind the desk.

"Is Senator Langford in?" Pryor asked the clerk.

"No, sir. The Senator is out on a buffalo hunt."

Pryor felt a sharp disappointment. He had looked forward to seeing his wartime friend ever since receiving the Senator's letter, an invitation to come to Dodge City and take part in a hunt. But he had been delayed at Fort Reno by Dull Knife's appeal for help, and it was likely that Langford had believed he was not coming.

"He didn't leave a message for me—Captain Pryor?" the Rio Kid asked.

"No, sir," came the reply. Then the clerk's pale face brightened. "One moment, Captain. There is a message here for you."

HE turned to the rack behind the desk, took out an envelope, handed it to Pryor. It was not a note from Senator Langford, but a telegram. Pryor tore open the envelope, unfolded the sheet of paper, and read, in the telegrapher's neat handwriting:

CAPTAIN ROBERT PRYOR
C/O SENATOR PHIL LANGFORD
DODGE CITY, KANSAS

BURRELL ESCAPED AND HEADED NORTH WITH MATT RIGBY, DESTINATION DODGE. THOUGHT YOU SHOULD HAVE WARNING. REGARDS.

MOWBREY

The Rio Kid read the message a second time, a frown darkening his face. He was not greatly surprised that Chris Burrell had managed to escape from the soldiers. Captain Mowbrey had but one troop of cavalry with him, and if he had run into trouble at the Cheyenne village, the least of his worries would have been the guarding of a civilian prisoner.

Besides, Burrell was certainly a tricky sort and would have no difficulty in outwitting some soldier standing casual guard over him. Pryor had not doubted that Burrell had sent the three hide-hunters to bushwhack Dull Knife, and now the man's flight was certainly an admission of guilt.

He was grateful to Captain Mowbrey for having sent him the warning, but it confused rather than cleared up the problem that Chris Burrell presented. The Rio Kid asked himself why Burrell should be on his way to Dodge City. True, the worst kind of men seemed to find their way to that wild town. But from what Pryor knew of Burrell, it was likely that the man was on his way for some definite purpose instead of on aimless flight.

Chris Burrell was a man who never made a move without a motive. By the same token, his attempt to get the Northern Cheyennes to jump the reservation had not been without motive—and behind that motive was some sort of self-interest.

Burrell had been a trader with the Cheyennes. That meant that he had supplied them with guns, ammunition, and whisky, along with the less dangerous trade goods required by the tribesmen. And Dodge was headquarters for gun-running and whisky smuggling.

It might be that Burrell was anxious to reestablish trade, but Pryor, though considering that motive, saw that such a scheme was impractical. The Northern Cheyennes now numbered only about three hundred, and less than a hundred were men who would need guns or have a thirst for cheap, sugared trade whisky. Besides, having been on a reservation for more than a year, the Indians would be poor customers for a trader. They would have nothing to barter.

"Burrell's up to something bigger," Pryor thought. He was certain that the

man was trifling with the lives of three hundred souls for more than the re-establishment of a trading post. "But what?" he asked himself.

He had no answer.

He and Celestino made their camp outside the town, one of numerous camps circling Dodge. They cooked and ate their supper, then sat smoking beside their fire for a time. Finally the Rio Kid grew restless.

"I'll ride in and make some inquiries," he said. "Mebbe I can find out what part of the buffalo country the Senator and his party headed for."

HE saddled his dun, mounted, and rode back into Dodge. Now, with full darkness, the town pulsed with rowdy life.

Heading for the Kansas House, the Rio Kid talked with the youthful clerk, but failed to learn from him which direction Senator Langford had taken on his hunting expedition. He did learn, however, that the man from Washington had left yesterday and expected to be gone but two or three days.

"George Bristow was one of the party," the clerk added as an afterthought.

The clerk spoke the name as though Pryor should recognize it.

"Who is George Bristow?" Pryor asked.

"He's a big man in these parts, Captain," came the reply. "He's head of a Chicago firm that operates a contracting firm here in Dodge and a big ranch in Wyoming." The clerk winked slyly. "Mr. Bristow is one of Dodge's biggest sports. Spends money like it grew on bushes."

Pryor nodded, left the hotel.

He walked idly along the street, with Saber following him. He saw a man come from the Alamo Saloon, a tall man in a black suit and hat. Once away from the saloon doorway, the man was in darkness and other men were constantly passing between him and the Rio Kid. But for an instant, the Rio Kid had believed that the man was Chris Burrell.

He halted, peering at the gaunt, black-clad figure. It was possible. Burrell could have reached Dodge from Indian Territorl by traveling day and night, by running one horse after another to the ground and changing mounts along the way.

A match flared. It was lifted to a cigar, and it glowed upon the man's face. Burrell's swarthy, angular face!

CHAPTER V

The Scent of Crooked Game

WHEN the match went out, Burrell turned and strode along the street in the direction away from the Rio Kid. He moved fast, his long legs taking long strides, deftly finding a passage through the crowds and knots of men. Pryor whistled softly in signal to his dun horse, and started after the man, but he became entangled with a bunch of drunken, fighting toughs that came bursting from a deadfall. By the time the Rio Kid broke clear of the roughnecks, with the spooked Saber rearing up and lashing out his forelegs to scatter them, Burrell had vanished from the street.

The Rio Kid went on searching, peering into saloons and stores, but he saw nothing of his quarry. He suspected that Burrell had seen him, and, becoming wary, had deliberately set out to lose himself. The Rio Kid went to the far edge of the town, then turned back—and saw Burrell standing in the lighted doorway of a small plank false-front. The sign over the entrance read:

LIL SHANNON'S PLACE
FARO, DRINKS, DANCING

Music and loud voices sounded within the deadfall. Chris Burrell remained lounging in the doorway.

Pryor tied Saber to the hitchrack in front of a store, then strode toward Burrell. He knew now that the man was

aware of his presence, and was iniviting a meeting. Burrell was again calmly puffing on a cigar. He nodded with a show of friendliness as the Rio Kid halted before him.

"So we meet again, Captain," he said.

"Yuh traveled fast, Burrell."

"Matt Rigby and I changed horses six times on the way."

"How'd yuh escape from the soldiers?"

"Let's say they released me," Burrell replied insolently. "You interfered with my plans down in Indian Territory, Pryor. I'd suggest that you don't meddle in my affairs again. As for your business with Senator Langford, I'd advise you to forget it. The Cheyennes are going to leave the reservation of their own accord. Little Wolf made the decision, and Dull Knife won't be able to change it."

"There'll be fightin'," the Rio Kid said flatly, angrily. "The Northern Cheyennes may be wiped out."

"You don't know much about the Cheyennes, Captain."

"And you do, eh?"

"I lived among them for years," said Burrell tauntingly. "In fact, I was for a time a squaw man. I'd like to make a little bet with you, Pryor. I'll wager a hundred dollars that the Cheyennes slip past the soldiers and get back to Wyoming."

"What will it get *you*, if they do?"

Burrell's face lost its bland look, his eyes became hostile.

"I was afraid you'd be too curious about me, Pryor," he said harshly. "And I don't like meddlers." He flung his cigar to the ground and lifted his voice: "All right, Matt!"

The Rio Kid whirled, but too late. A gun was jabbed into his left side.

"Don't move a hair, hombre!" Matt Rigby growled. "I'm itching to kill yuh for what yuh done to my pardners down in Indian Territory!"

It would have meant instant death for the Rio Kid to have grabbed for his twin Colts. Matt Rigby's gun was cocked, and there was hatred and threat in the man's eyes. The Rio Kid stiffened. He fought down anger. He had only himself to blame. He should have known that Matt Rigby was close by. He should have guessed that Burrell had kept talking to give Rigby a chance to sneak up.

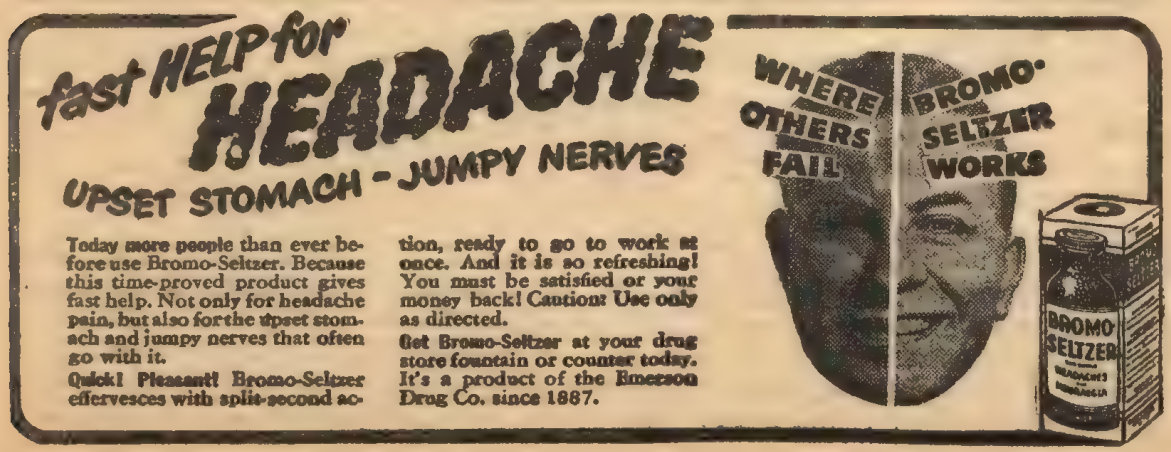
He now saw that there was a third man, this one covering him with a gun from the corner of the building. Evidently Burrell had gone into the saloon to rig the trap, and Rigby and the other tough had slipped out through a back door and crept along the alleyway at the side of the building.

"Pete," Rigby said, "come and get this hombre's hardware."

The man called Pete came forward, lifted the six-shooters from the Rio Kid's outside holsters. He was a wiry youth wearing a cowhand's duds. He thrust the captured weapons into the waistband of his levis.

"All right," Chris Burrell said sharply. "Get him off the street before Masterson or Earp happen along."

Matt Rigby's gun jabbed harder into his captive's side. [*Turn page*]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WHERE OTHERS FAIL
BROMO-SELTZER WORKS
BROMO SELTZER

THE RIO KID still had the two hideout guns he always wore concealed beneath his army blouse, but Matt Rigby and the tough-visaged youth crowded him so closely that he had no chance to get hold of his spare guns. They flanked him. Chris Burrell followed close behind.

They marched the Rio Kid through the alley alongside Lil Shannon's Place, then turned along the rear of the Front Street buildings. They came finally to a bulky building that was probably a

CHRIS BURRELL

warehouse, and, as they halted at the door, upon which Burrell knocked, the Rio Kid read the sign across the front of the building:

BRISTOW CONSTRUCTION & SUPPLY CO.

The door opened, and there was a glare of lamplight. A man dressed in town fashion and with side-whiskers peered out.

"What's wrong, Burrell?" he demanded.

Chris Burrell's manner changed. He took on an almost servile air and tone that betrayed the fact that he was not the leader in whatever sort of shady game was being played.

"I've got to see George Bristow," he said. "It's important. My boys and I have caught a hombre getting nosey about our business."

The man with the side-whiskers looked annoyed, and he spoke grudgingly.

"All right, come in."

He stepped aside, permitted Burrell and his men to enter with the Rio Kid, then closed the door.

The Rio Kid found himself in a large office. Three men besides the one who had opened the door sat about a paper-littered desk. Judging by their dress Bob Pryor was certain they were all big-city men.

"Burrell," one said gruffly, "if this is another of your blunders . . ." It was a threat, though unfinished.

"Not at all, Mr. Bristow," Burrell began. "This man—"

The Rio Kid saw how quickly Chris Burrell fell silent upon a gesture from Bristow. He also noted that George Bristow's brusque manner was the mark of a domineering man. Bristow was without a doubt the dominating figure here, and he didn't let the others forget it for a moment.

He was a robust man in his middle fifties, Pryor judged, ruddy of complexion, and his hair and close-clipped mustache were iron-gray. As he stood up, the Rio Kid saw that he was well over six feet tall. His body was thick, but not with excess poundage. George Bristow looked hard and fit, and he looked shrewd. He weighed and measured the Rio Kid with chill eyes.

"He's the man you ran into down in Indian Territory?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Burrell. "His name is Pryor. He's called the Rio Kid. I've heard of him. He's a troublemaker."

Bristow continued to scrutinize the Rio Kid. "What's your game, Pryor?"

"I'll ask you the same question, Bristow," Pryor said flatly. "If Burrell is one of your men, you're mixed up in some sort of crooked game. I saw how he works, down in Indian Territory."

"You're not in a position to ask questions, Pryor."

"I'll ask them, just the same. I came here to join Senator Langford. I was told that he's out on a hunt—with you. Now I find yuh here in Dodge. That takes some explaining."

"I owe you no explanations," Bristow snapped. "But I'll give you one, at least. I was on a hunt with the Senator, but I was called back here because of business. He remained with the rest of the party."

"In what part of the country?"

"The outfit was heading west when I turned back."

"Thanks," said Pryor. "I'll find Langford, and have a talk with him."

"I think not," Bristow said bluntly. "You meddled with Burrell's business at the Cheyenne-Arapahoe Agency, and you're apt to meddle some more—in my business. I can't have that, Pryor. I can't afford to have some adventurer ruin my plans. Alone, you can't hurt me. But with Senator Langford siding you, you might be able to cause me a great deal of trouble. I advise you, Captain Pryor, not to try to see the Senator."

The Rio Kid's face was rocky. "Yuh don't figger I'll take your advice?" Despite the two hardcases guarding him, he stepped to the long table-topped desk and faced Bristow across its length. "I'm not armed, and I'm in your power, of course. But before yuh threaten me, yuh'd better have a look at my credentials."

BRISTOW flashed Burrell a scowling look.

"I thought you told me he wasn't with the Army."

"The soldiers at Fort Reno claimed he wasn't," Burrell said uneasily.

Bristow looked back at the Rio Kid. "All right," he ordered. "Get out your papers. But don't think that I can be intimidated."

His voice broke, for the Rio Kid, having unbuttoned his blouse, brought out not some sort of official documents but one of his hide-out guns. The gun was cocked. Its muzzle bored at Bristow.

"One move by anybody," the Rio Kid said harshly, "and I'll squeeze the trigger, Bristow!" He saw alarm in the man's eyes, saw the color drain from the florid face. "Tell your pardners to move around behind you, so I can see all of them!"

The three other men obeyed without a word from Bristow. They were all about their boss' age, but far more timid than he. They shrank to the far side of the room, cowered against the wall. Obviously, they were men who lived by their wits and feared violence. The other three—Burrell, Matt Rigby and Pete—were not so easily frightened. They remained behind the Rio Kid.

"Say the word, Burrell," Pete muttered, "and I'll back-shoot the tricky son!"

"Yeah," Matt Rigby growled. "Yuh want us to down him, Chris?"

Burrell didn't get a chance to reply. Bristow swore.

"Burrell, call off Rigby and Saba," he said savagely. "Those trigger-quick fools will get me killed. The three of you do as Pryor says—get behind me."

They obeyed then, sullenly.

"You, Saba," the Rio Kid said, "lay my guns on the table."

Pete Saba obeyed in that, too, adding a murderous look.

The Rio Kid picked up one of the long-barreled Colts with his left hand, used it to cover the group while he put away the hide-out gun. Then he picked up the other six-shooter with his right hand. He was smiling mirthlessly now.

"Looks like a fine bag of game," he said. "And I didn't need to leave Dodge to do the baggin'."

"No reason for you to be cocky, Pryor," Bristow said flatly, getting back his nerve. "You haven't the upper hand, at all. You know why not?"

"You tell me, Bristow."

"Gladly. I can get a rider to that hunting party before you can find it—if you live to ride from Dodge."

"I'll grant that," said the Rio Kid. "But what will it get yuh?"

"Every man in that party, other than Langford, is my man."

"So?"

"So the rider I send out," said Bristow slowly, making a point of each

word, "will have orders to see that you nor anybody else talks with Langford." He took a cigar from a humidor on the desk, took his time in lighting it. Finally he went on, "I might even go a step farther, Captain, if you continue to meddle in affairs that don't concern you. Accidents often occur during hunting trips, sometimes fatal accidents. It would be too bad if something happened to a man as important as Phil Langford —because of you."

The Rio Kid stared in disbelief. He found it difficult to believe that Bristow was serious in threatening the life of a United States Senator.

But it was true. George Bristow was making a hostage of Langford, and the Senator's safety depended upon the Rio Kid's backing down. It was ruthless. These men were far more savage, in their own way, than the uncivilized Cheyennes. George Bristow and the other three city men probably posed as reputable citizens, and were accepted at their face value, but they were as treacherous as Chris Burrell, Matt Rigby and Pete Saba.

Bristow continued to puff on his cigar, and smiled blandly.

"So you see I hold the winning cards, Pryor—or Rio Kid, if you prefer. Stop meddling, if you want to make sure that nothing happens to your friend the Senator while on that buffalo hunt. Now, if you don't mind, my colleagues and I have certain matters to discuss."

IT was dismissal. The Rio Kid held the cocked gun, but Bristow was master of the situation.

Behind Bristow, the three men of his own sort had recovered their courage and were looking smug. They reminded the Rio Kid of tinhorn gamblers with the faces of church deacons. Chris Burrell was imitating Bristow by calmly lighting a cigar. Matt Rigby stared at the Rio Kid with hate-filled eyes, and young Pete Saba looked keyed up and ready to grab out his gun and start shooting.

"Like yuh say, yuh hold the winnin' cards," Pryor told Bristow. "I'll back down to save Phil Langford. But if I get the chance, after he's out of yore hands, I'm goin' to find out what yore game is—and bust it wide open!"

He backed to the door, opened it by reaching behind him after holstering his left-hand gun. None of them moved as he stepped out and jerked the door closed after him. But just as he leaped to one side, a gun inside crashed once, twice, and a third time. The slugs splintered through the door. But they didn't touch the Rio Kid. He slipped away through the darkness.

CHAPTER VI

A Stampede Fails

BOB PRYOR came to a litter of rubbish behind one of the saloons, and took cover behind some empty whisky and beer kegs. After a moment the door of the warehouse was cautiously opened. Three men slipped out and headed in the direction opposite to that in which the Rio Kid had fled. Burrell and his two toughs were, as Pryor had expected, returning to the part of town where they had picked him up. They knew where he had left his horse and no doubt hoped to catch him there.

The door to the warehouse was closed again, and for a moment Pryor considered returning and attempting to force George Bristow and his partners into revealing what they were up to. Then, fearing a trap, he decided against it. He was aware that he must not underestimate this crowd. Bristow was shrewd and unscrupulous, Burrell possessed a wolfish cunning.

Pryor also reminded himself that Bristow's threat to make use of Senator Langford as a hostage might be just that—a threat, not a bluff. He must not only attempt to safeguard his own life, but must not endanger the Senator.

WYATT EARP

WYATT EARP was born at Monmouth, Illinois, in 1849, and went west as a youth. He was a bullwhacker on the Overland and Santa Fe trails; he was a buffalo hunter, and gained experience as an Indian fighter. He was briefly a professional gambler, and for two years a policeman at Wichita, Kansas, then became marshal of wild Dodge City. That was in '77 through '79, when Earp served, one of the riskiest jobs on earth, but there—in company with Bat Masterson, Doc Holliday, Luke Short, Bill Tilghman, Ben Thompson, and other noted men of the sixgun—Earp became famous for reckless courage.

When Dodge lost some of its wildness, Earp went to Tombstone, Arizona, at the height of the bonanza silver strike. Then 30, he arrived with a deputy U. S. marshal's badge pinned to his shirt. Doc Holliday, the sickly dentist turned gambler and gunman, followed him. So did Bat Masterson and others of the Dodge City crowd. Earp's four brothers—Virgil, Morgan, James, Warren—turned up in Tombstone, too. Thus come into being "the Earp faction."

Wyatt Earp and his crowd were politically at odds with "the Behan faction," headed by Sheriff John Behan, and were at war with a wild bunch known as the Clanton-McLowery gang. A bloody fight at the OK Corral between the Earp crowd and the outlaw gang was one of the West's most famous gun battles.

Some historians claim that Wyatt Earp was a square-shooter, others question his character and his actions. After Tombstone, Earp spent some time in Denver, kept a saloon at Nome, Alaska, during the Klondike gold rush, and later was prominent in the mining towns of the Nevada desert. He was happily married, prosperous, and lived to be nearly eighty. This wizard of the sixgun died—with his boots off.

Saving Langford meant that he must break his promise to Dull Knife. And the Bio Kid did not go back on his given word.

That was not merely his boast. It was a rule he lived by.

There had to be a way to keep Langford from harm, and yet keep his prom-

ise to Dull knife. The only way, he realized, was to get help.

He left his odorous hiding-place among the whisky and beer kegs, and headed for the office of Sheriff Bat Masterson.

The headquarters of the sheriff of Ford County, in which Dodge City was located, was a box-sized building with a grimy and cracked plate-glass window. A sorrel horse stood ground-hitched before it. The door stood wide open, but Captain Bob Pryor, stepping inside, found the place empty.

He had no sooner entered than there was a drumming of hoofs. A rider seemed about to ride straight into the office. Pryor turned, saw the rider jerk to a stop almost in the doorway. He saw with surprise that it was a girl—a girl of about twenty in a man's range clothes. She was mounted on a blowing pinto pony, was flushed and breathing hard. Her hat hung at her shoulders by its chin-strap, and her tawny blonde hair was tousled.

"Where's the sheriff?" she demanded excitedly. "Where's Bat Masterson?"

Doffing his hat, Pryor said that he didn't know the sheriff's whereabouts.

"Is there anything I can do, miss?" he asked.

"Yes, you'll do! Get on your horse and come along!"

The girl turned her pinto away.

Taken by surprise, Pryor stepped to the doorway but halted there and stared after her. She looked back, saw that he was not following.

"Come along!" she said sharply. "My herd's being raided by rustlers!"

She apparently took Pryor for a deputy sheriff or some other local official because she had found him in the sheriff's office. And she expected him to come with her. She was again riding on to leave town and race back to her herd. She needed help, and he could not refuse it. He stepped from the doorway, looked about, saw nothing of Sheriff Masterson, so mounted the sorrel standing there, and swung away after the girl.

He overtook her at the edge of town. Riding stirrup to stirrup, they struck out across the dark plains at a lope.

"It's only three miles or a little more," the girl said. "We should be able to stop it. Those ornery cow thieves didn't figure on me slipping away and getting the law to help."

Pryor gave her an amused glance. She talked like a man.

They raced across the short grass. The country dipped and rolled, and finally they topped a rise of ground and saw gunflashes. They heard the racketing gunfire, and the thunder of hoofs of cattle in stampede. The girl drew her rifle from its saddle-boot, evidently intending to take part in the fight. Pryor drew his right-hand Colt.

"You keep out of it," he said brusquely. "A girl's got no business taking part in a gunfight."

"Listen, mister," she retorted, "I'm the boss of that outfit!"

And she came right along with the again surprised Rio Kid.

THEY drew close, coming in from the left flank of the wildly running cattle. It was a small herd of whitefaces, about two hundred head, and the critters were stampeding west. The Rio Kid counted seven riders racing with the herd, two to a side and three bringing up the drag. They were shooting back at two pursuers who came doggedly on, defying the rustlers' guns, and shooting as they galloped along.

The two rustlers riding left swing caught sight of the Rio Kid and the girl, and one whistled shrilly in signal to the others. Both the near swing riders turned their guns on Pryor and his companion. He heard the whine of slugs, and again shouted to the girl to keep clear of it. Then his Colt blazed.

A scream tore from the throat of one of the swing riders. The rustler pitched from his saddle, spilled to the ground, but his foot was caught in the stirrup and his lifeless body was dragged along by his spooked horse. Pryor's second shot creased the other swing rider, causing him to yelp and drop his gun. Swinging the sorrel around, the Rio Kid

opened fire on the drag riders. He missed two shots, but those three riders lost their nerve and veered off to the right.

The girl's rifle cracked sharply, and her two riders coming along after the herd were still shooting. The Rio Kid raced around the drag, once the crazed herd was past, and took after the fleeing rustlers. The man who had been wounded had hightailed to the south, but the other five headed north. They kept shooting back at the Rio Kid, but their marksmanship was poor.

After perhaps a mile of wild flight, they split up and scattered. The Rio Kid reined in, fired a couple of shots to speed them on their way. They vanished into the darkness, and finally the sound of their flight faded away. After reloading his guns, Pryor turned back and saw that the girl and her two cowhands had caught up with the stampeding herd. They were turning the leaders, and shortly would have the entire bunch milling and under control.

The Rio Kid helped drive the cattle back to the trail camp. On the way, he introduced himself and learned that the girl's name was Laurie Mason. She was the daughter of Sam Mason, a Wyoming rancher, and she had come here with the two cowhands, Nick Glennon and Ed Larsen, to accept delivery of the two hundred head of Herefords which had been shipped out from Kansas City. Sam Mason's Slash M range was stocked with Texas longhorns, and he had bought the white-faces for breeding purposes to improve his herd.

Once back at the camp, with the two cowhands riding about the still skittish cattle, Pryor learned more about the Slash M from Laurie. She built up the fire and put on the coffee pot, and talked.

"The cattle were on the way, and Dad was laid up," she told Pryor. Her voice turned bitter. "He was shot from ambush the day before he was to start on the trip to Kansas. It wasn't a serious wound, but he was in no condition to make the trip. So it was up to me."

"Why was your father bushwhacked?" he asked.

"Well, it's sort of complicated," Laurie said, giving the Rio Kid a woman's look of interest. It was apparent that she was taken by the handsome young man in Army blue. "There's been trouble in the Wyoming cattle country for the past six months or so. Most of the ranchers there are Texans, like us Masons. We have small outfits. But there's one big outfit, the B Seventy-seven. The B stands for Bristow and the Seventy-seven for the year in which the outfit was established. The B Seventy-seven is a—"

"Bristow, yuh say?" Pryor interrupted.

"Yes. Dick Bristow runs the outfit."

"Any relation to George Bristow of Dodge?"

The girl nodded. "Dick is George Bristow's stepson," she said, and there was a catch in her voice each time she spoke the name "Dick." Evidently Dick Bristow and Laurie Mason had once been on friendly terms. "The B Seventy-seven is a range-grabbing outfit. It's already the biggest ranch in Wyoming, but Dick Bristow isn't satisfied. He's been trying to buy out the two-bit ranchers."

"And they won't sell?"

"No. The price offered is a steal price."

"Dick Bristow tried to buy out yore father?"

LAURIE flushed, averted her eyes. "He did," she said flatly. "He even had the nerve to spark me—just to get me to talk Dad into selling. I refused to do such a thing. Dad refused to sell. Why should the ranchers sell out when they came all the way from Texas to settle on Wyoming range? They've as much right as Dick Bristow to raise cattle."

"So your father got bushwhacked after refusin' to sell?"

"Yes."

"Yuh blame Dick Bristow?"

Laurie was slow in replying this time.

"Maybe Dick Bristow didn't do the bushwhacking," she said finally, "but it must have been a B Seventy-seven rider,

under Dick's orders. That outfit has a big crew of tough hands who are trying to terrorize the two-bit ranchers." The girl paused, then added angrily, "I'd gamble that those rustlers tonight were put up to raiding our herd by the B Seventy-seven outfit."

Pryor nodded. "The loss of those Herefords would have hurt your father plenty," he said. "Dick Bristow would know that, and likely he knew the cattle were on the way."

"He knew, all right," Laurie said bitterly. "And if we'd lost those Herefords, the Slash M would have been ruined. Dad had to borrow money to pay for this herd. But that's just what the Bristows want. If they can ruin Sam Mason, force him into bankruptcy, they'll be able to take over the Slash M and add it to B Seventy-seven!"

The pattern of the Bristow crowd's scheming was still far from clear to the Rio Kid, but now he had a glimpse of its vague outline. He still did not know why the crowd—Chris Burrell, at least—was interested in having the Northern Cheyennes jump their reservation, but he hazarded a guess that it had some bearing on this plot to wrest the Wyoming cattle country away from the little ranchers.

He watched Laurie Mason lift the coffee pot from the fire and fill two tin cups. She was a pretty girl. He liked her. He knew the stock she came from—good, honest, hard-working people. He wanted to help her and her father, and all the other ranch folks who were bucking the powerful Bristow crowd. But he dared not volunteer that help so long as Senator Langford was within range of a Bristow gun.

Laurie handed him a cup of coffee.

"I'm grateful, Captain Pryor," she said gravely. "I'm obliged to you for driving off those rustlers." She gave him a look that was wholly feminine, and lowered her voice. "I'd like to have you hire on with Slash M and help drive the herd to Wyoming."

Laurie's smile coaxed, her eyes held an invitation. The Rio Kid would have been but half a man had he not found her attractive and been tempted. But he realized that the Bristow crowd would not be long in finding out that he had joined the Slash M trail outfit. He shook his head.

"If yuh're afraid those rustlers will jump yuh again," he said, seeing Laurie's disappointment, "I'll send a man out to help gun-guard the herd."

"Well, if you know of a man who can be trusted."

"He's my pard, Celestino Mireles. Yuh won't find a better man."

"Celestino Mireles? My, what a name!"

"He's a Mexican," Pryor said. "One of the best that ever crossed the Border."

He finished his coffee, said good-by to the girl, mounted his "borrowed" sorrel horse, and rode out.

Arriving at his camp, he told Mireles about the rustler raid on the Slash M herd and about what had happened in town earlier. He explained that he would like the young Mexican to join the Slash M trail herd and help drive the cattle up to the Wyoming ranch.

"Once there," he added, "mebbe yuh'll be able to find out why this Bristow crowd is so anxious to have the Cheyennes go back to Wyomin'."

"And if I learn something, General?" Mireles asked.

"Get word to me here at Dodge," Pryor told him.

"You want me to stay with the Slash M outfit until I hear from you?"

Pryor nodded. "It won't be long," he said. "In fact, I've a hunch that before this business is settled, I'll be makin' a trip to that part of the country. If so, I'll meet yuh at the Slash M Ranch."

They shook hands, and Pryor turned toward town. . . .

JUST as he entered Dodge, a voice slapped out at the Rio Kid:

"You, soldier! Get off that hoss and put up your hands! This is the law talkin'!"

Pryor obeyed with haste. He was sure that none of the Bristow crowd would try to pose as a lawman; any of that

bunch would be more likely to shoot him from ambush. As he stood beside the sorrel horse, his hands high, he saw a lanky man step from the shadows of a dark building. A badge glinted on the man's shirt. There was a six-gun in his hand.

The Rio Kid recognized Wyatt Earp at once. There was no forgetting the man, once having seen him. Earp was a gaunt man, loose-limbed, but heavy bones gave him a powerful frame. He was in his late twenties, and already a well-known gunfighter. His face was long and pale, his eyes a chill blue-gray. He had a massive, jutting chin. A tawny mustache hid a rather grim mouth.

As marshal of Dodge City, Earp held down one of the most dangerous jobs on earth.

There was no bluster about him as he said quietly: "Pryor, I'd think that you of all men would know that hoss-stealin' is bad business. Especially stealin' a sheriff's hoss."

"Borrowed it, Marshal," Pryor replied. "I was returnin' it."

"Your story."

"Yuh don't believe it?"

"Never believe a word a hoss thief says," Earp replied. "Head for the sheriff's office, mister. Take the evidence of yore crime with yuh. Masterson's goin' to be mighty pleased when he learns that I not only got his sorrel back, but caught the thief, into the bargain. Get goin'!"

Even the Rio Kid obeyed a command by Wyatt Earp.

He caught up the sorrel's reins and led the animal along Front Street to the sheriff's office, Earp coming along behind him. He left the horse ground-hitched on the spot from which he had taken it, then preceded the marshal into the small plank building.

"Bat" Masterson was seated at his desk. He looked up, a smile coming to his round face as he recognized Bob Pryor.

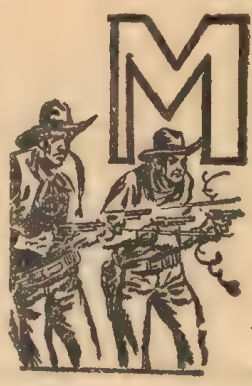
But Earp spoke first.

"Here's the hombre who stole your sorrel, Sheriff."

"Well, I'll be hanged!"

CHAPTER VII

The Law in Dodge City



MASTERSON rose and faced the Rio Kid. He was a short, stocky man. He was one of the West's most courageous gunfighting peace officers and, like Wyatt Earp, he was still a young man. Masterson was an amiable man ordinarily, but now his handsome face took on a rocky look that the worst of desperadoes had come to fear.

"I've seen men hanged for hoss-stealin', Pryor," he said flatly.

"Now, Bat, if yuh'll let me explain—"

"There's no explanation for hoss-stealin'!" Masterson growled.

"We'll book him," Earp said, "and lock him up."

"Yeah. There's no worse crime than stealin' a man's hoss."

"A sheriff's hoss," said Earp. "That makes it worse."

Pryor got it, then. Their anger was simulated. They were riding him, and enjoying his discomfiture. He kept a straight face.

"All right!" he said, "I'll confess. I'm a no-good hoss thief, and even hangin's too good for me. I'm ready to take my medicine."

Masterson couldn't restrain himself any longer, and he burst out with loud laughter. The dour Wyatt Earp chuckled briefly, then slapped the Rio Kid on the back.

"Had yuh goin' for a while, didn't we?" he said. "What's goin' on, anyway? I saw that wall-eyed Saber hoss of yours at the other end of town just ten minutes ago. How come yuh borrowed Bat's sorrel?"

Seldom did three men so destined for adventure meet under the same roof. Their trails would separate and lead them to strange places and into strange troubles, for they were restless men, but at the moment Bob Pryor, the Rio

Kid, Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson shared a strong comradeship. The two lawmen listened attentively while the Rio Kid told them how Laurie Mason had come to the sheriff's office for help and how he had ridden out with her and driven off the rustlers.

"Reckon it's up to me, as sheriff, to ride out there," Masterson said.

Pryor shook his head. "I doubt if them rustlers will try to raid the Mason herd again," he said. "At least, not so close to Dodge. Yuh can investigate, of course, but I doubt if you find out who the rustlers are. They hightailed. I killed one. If the body hasn't been picked up by the others, it might give yuh a lead. But I figger they were just a bunch of Dodge City toughs hired for the job."

"Hired?" Masterson said sharply. "What yuh mean by that?"

"Laurie Mason figgers somebody is tryin' to ruin the Slash M outfit," Pryor explained. "The Slash M is a two-bit outfit, and the loss of those Herefords would finish her dad, Sam Mason."

He told the two lawmen what he'd learned from the girl about the range trouble in Wyoming, and then revealed his encounter with the Bristow crowd and spoke of the affair down in Indian Territory. Earp and Masterson might have been skeptical if any man but the Rio Kid had told them such a fantastic story.

But they did not question his word. Earp swore under his breath as Pryor told how George Bristow had threatened to have an "accident" befall Senator Phil Langford if Pryor continued to meddle in his affairs.

"Use a United States Senator as a hostage!" Bat Masterson said angrily. "The man must be crazy!"

"What do you two know about George Bristow?" the Rio Kid asked. He knew he could count on the two badge-wearers for help.

Wyatt Earp answered, speaking in his dust-dry voice.

"Bristow's kind never hand out much information about theirselves. He's from Chicago, and he's got plenty of money behind him. His construction company does a lot of buildin' in Kansas and Colorado and Texas. He contracts for railroad work and bridges. I heard about him takin' over a ranch in Wyomin'. A bank owned the spread, havin' foreclosed on it when the owner couldn't meet a note. Bristow took the ranch in payment for a new buildin' he put up for the bank."

"Looks like Bristow's got a hankerin' to be a big rancher," Masterson said. "That's new country, up there in Wyomin', and mebbe he aims to own it all before it can get settled."

Pryor nodded. "That explains a part of it," he said. "But I still can't understand why the Bristow crowd wants the Northern Cheyennes to jump the reservation. I'd give plenty to know George Bristow's plans. If I could get hold of that Chris Burrell, I might be able to scare him into talking. But with Langford in their hands—well, I'm hogtied."

"Yuh'll be dead, too," said Earp, "if yuh don't watch yoreself. If that crowd is out to steal a whole range, they'll not let one man stop 'em. And bushwhackin' is easy."

"We've got to do somethin' to protect Senator Langford," Masterson said. "I'd shore look like a poor-fool of a sheriff if a Senator got hisself killed in my county." He reached for his gun-belt on the desk, buckled it about his thick middle. "Let's us three pay Mr. Bristow a little visit."

THEY went around to the building that housed the warehouse and office of the Bristow Construction and Supply Company, and Wyatt Earp knocked upon the door with the butt of his six-shooter. The sedate looking man with the side whiskers opened the door.

"Well, what is it?" he asked impatiently.

"We want to see Bristow," said Earp.

Pushing the man aside, he entered. Masterson and Pryor followed. George Bristow was alone except for the man with the side-whiskers.

"Bristow," Earp said bluntly, "we want a word with yuh."

Bristow was seated at the flat-topped

desk, and he had been writing a letter. He looked up with an annoyed frown, then smiled blandly.

"Ah, the representatives of law and order. What can I do for you, gentlemen?" His manner was friendly, aboveboard, and he looked like an honest business man. "Cigars?" he asked, pushing his humidor across the desk.

Earp shook his head. He was frosty-eyed, studying the man at the desk intently.

"Bristow, the sheriff and I have known Captain Pryor a long time," he said flatly. "We know him to be a truthful man. He told us what happened here earlier tonight, and we don't like it. We don't like it, at all."

Bristow looked surprised.

"I don't follow you, Marshal," he said. "Pryor came here and said he'd heard that I'd started on a buffalo hunt with his friend, Senator Langford. I told him he'd heard right, but that I'd been called back on business. That is all that happened here. After Pryor left, I sent a rider to overtake the Senator's party with a message. I sent my regrets that I couldn't rejoin the party."

Pryor stepped forward, his face rocky. "Bristow, yuh're lyin'!"

Bristow glanced at his companion. "Evans, am I lying, or did I tell the truth about Pryor's visit?"

Evans tugged at his whiskers, said, with a show of surprise, "Why, you told the truth, Mr. Bristow. I don't understand what Captain Pryor thinks—or imagines—happened here."

Bristow smiled, remained silent.

WYATT EARP muttered an oath under his breath, and Bat Masterson looked uncertain. Pryor restrained himself with difficulty. He was angry enough to take hold of George Bristow and choke the truth from him.

"So yuh sent a rider out to the huntin' party?"

"Exactly."

"Who is that rider?"

"Young Pete Saba," said Bristow, and smiled again—meaningfully.

Pryor understood. Bristow was saying, without putting it into words, that the young tough, Saba, would be the cause of the "accident" that would befall Senator Langford if the Rio Kid persisted in meddling in the game. Bristow had the captain's hands tied, and was amused by the Rio Kid's helplessness.

Earp and Masterson were aware that Bristow had outwitted Pryor, but there was nothing they could do. They could charge the man with no crime, and so were in no more of a position to act than the Rio Kid. But they were not men to be trifled with.

"Bristow," Bat Masterson said sourly, "I'm givin' yuh a warnin'. If anything happens to Senator Langford, I'm goin' to hold you responsible."

"Nothing is going to happen to the Senator," Bristow retorted. He glanced at the Rio Kid. "Right, Pryor?"

Before Pryor could reply, there was an urgent knock at the door. Evans went to answer it, and returned with a sheet of paper.

"The telegram you were expecting, Mr. Bristow," he said, and gave the message to his boss.

Bristow read the telegram, laid it aside, reached for a cigar. "Gentlemen," he said, after lighting up, "I've just received a message from my agent at Fort Reno. The Northern Cheyennes have

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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MANNA FROM TEXAS

An Exciting Action Novelet

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

left their reservation and are heading north—toward Kansas. I might add, on my own, that this town of Dodge lies right in their path—if the Army doesn't stop them."

IT wasn't easy to jolt men like Earp and Masterson, but they now appeared stunned. The Rio Kid was not taken by surprise, however. He had feared that such a thing would happen, and he knew that George Bristow, having engineered it through Chris Burrell, was satisfied now that the Indians were on the move.

"Yuh win every hand, don't yuh, Bristow?" he said savagely.

Bristow stared at him blankly. "I'm afraid I don't understand your meaning, Captain." He rose, gathered his papers together, glanced at his companion. "You'll take charge here, Evans. I'm leaving Dodge tonight or tomorrow."

"Let's find out if there's any truth in this," Bat Masterson muttered, and turned to the door.

Wyatt Earp followed him, and the Rio Kid, after a final bitter look at George Bristow, went after them.

It was not a false alarm. When Bob Pryor and the two lawmen reached the telegraph office at the depot, the key was clattering and the busy operator pushed a sheet of paper at Masterson. It was a wire, a warning, sent to the sheriff by the commanding officer at Fort Reno.

It read:

LARGE NUMBER OF ARMED INDIANS HEADED TOWARD MEDICINE LODGE RIVER, POSSIBLY DODGE CITY. ADVISE YOU TAKE STEPS TO SAFEGUARD CIVILIANS AND TO AVERT INCIDENTS.

"This is crazy," Earp muttered. "Where's the Army—asleep?"

"Dog Soldiers," said Masterson.

"What do you mean, Dog Soldiers?" the marshal shot back. "The soldiers can't be scared of Dog Soldiers. Even if those Indians get as far as Kansas, they're shore not going to raid Dodge City. What would it get 'em? Besides, Fort Dodge is close by."

"Infantry at Fort Dodge," Masterson said. "Yuh can't stop Dog Soldiers with infantry. He glanced at the Rio Kid. "How many in this band?"

"About three hundred."

"Three hundred!"

"Most of 'em are women and children," the Rio Kid went on. "Only about ninety are braves. I think Wyatt is right. They won't bother this town, or any town. All those Cheyennes want is to get back to their homeland. I'm more worried about Senator Langford bein' held by the Bristow crowd. We didn't get anywhere with George Bristow, but there must be a way to learn the whereabouts of that huntin' party."

"There's a way, all right," Marshal Earp said, with a wry smile. "Catch Bristow's pardner, Evans, alone and throw a scare into him."

The Rio Kid gave him a quizzical glance. Earp caught it.

"The Law in Dodge City will be too busy worrying about Indians during the next half hour or so," he said, "to bother about somebody gettin' a scare thrown into him."

Pryor needed no further urging.

The Law in Dodge might not be blind but, as the Rio Kid had heard, it did on occasion look the other way.

CHAPTER VIII

To the Senator's Rescue

EVANS, the man with the holier-than-thou look, was just locking the office door when the Rio Kid, moving silently through the darkness, approached the warehouse. Evans pocketed his key, turned, took three steps toward an alley that led to Front Street, then froze.

"Who's there?" he gasped.

He fumbled in his coat pocket as he peered about, but before he could draw

BAT MASTERSON

BAT MASTERSON became sheriff of Dodge City at the age of 22, and that he stayed alive on such a job proved that he was a good man with a gun. But he was not trigger-jumpy; Masterson possessed a sense of fairness and an iron nerve that permitted him to use gunplay only as a last resort. He usually called upon the lawless to surrender, then, if they refused, beat them to the draw. While peace officer at Dodge for Ford County, Masterson also owned a gambling house.

He was at Adobe Walls when fourteen men stood off, in a desperate fight, five hundred Cheyenne, Comanche and Kiowa warriors. He also served as a scout for General Miles. He was loyal to his friends, and several times took the vengeance trail when someone close to him was killed. His brother, Ed, a deputy sheriff, was killed at Dodge.

Masterson was at Tombstone after Dodge's heydey, and later dealt faro in a Denver gambling house. President Theodore Roosevelt was his friend, and offered to make him U. S. marshal at Tombstone. Masterson declined, for he was growing tired of gunfighting. The President then made him deputy U. S. marshal of New York. Finally Bat made one of the strangest switches of any Western sixgun-master. He became a newspaperman, and for seventeen years, until his peaceful death, he was a respected member of the newspaper fraternity.

whatever weapon he carried the Rio Kid caught him from behind. A muscular arm closed about Evan's throat, a powerful hand caught his right wrist with a viselike grip. Evans was helpless in the Rio Kid's grasp. The pressure on his throat caused him to utter strangling sounds. He struggled fiercely for a moment, then weakened and grew limp.

The Rio Kid removed some of the pressure.

"Talk, mister," he ordered. "Whereabouts is that huntin' party?"

"I—I don't know!"

"You know, all right," said the Rio Kid, and again applied pressure.

"Wait!"

"Where's that hunting party?"

"It's somewhere around Lost Squaw Creek!"

"Don't lie to me, mister!"

Evans was gripped by panic. "It's the truth!" he cried, almost hysterically. "I heard George Bristow tell Saba to ride out to the Lost Squaw Creek country!"

The Rio Kid sensed that the man was too frightened not to tell the truth. He released Evans's wrist, reached into the man's pocket, pulled out a derringer. He stepped away from Evans, tossed the vicious little weapon out into the darkness. Evans stood there, shaking.

"Keep yore mouth shut about this," the Rio Kid said. "If I find gunmen on my trail when I head for Lost Squaw Creek, I'll look yuh up when I get back here."

Evans nodded jerkily. The Rio Kid turned away, then swung back.

"Why did Bristow want them Cheyennes to jump their reservation?"

"I don't know," Evans said quickly. "That's the truth. He doesn't tell me all his plans. I just manage his supply business here. Chris Burrell can tell you. He and Bristow worked it out."

"All right, mister," the Rio Kid said. "You keep quiet about this."

He turned away, moving fast.

Behind him, Evans took out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

Wyatt Earp was alone in the sheriff's office when Pryor arrived.

"Any luck?" he asked.

His long face showed amusement as Pryor told him of how easily Evans had broken. He took a map from a desk drawer, spread it out, showed the location of Lost Squaw Creek.

"It's a forty-mile ride," he pointed out.

"I'll make it before sunup," Pryor said.

He studied the map for several minutes, then they left the office. Earp went along to where Pryor had left his horse, to guard against an attack on the Rio Kid by Chris Burrell and Matt Rigby. But those two did not put in an appearance. Pryor mounted. "Luck, pardner," Wyatt Earp said, as he swung away.

The Rio Kid left Dodge City at a lope, heading west. . . .

An hour before dawn, the Rio Kid halted among some scrub cottonwoods that fringed a shallow stream. He offsaddled the blowing and lathered Saber, walked the dun to and fro, so that the war horse cooled gradually. He next rubbed the horse down, watered him at the stream. Then he rolled up in his blanket, to sleep until sunup.

He woke promptly when the sun was just above the eastern rim of the prairie. There was a knobby rise about a hundred yards south of the cottonwoods, and he walked there and climbed to the top. He could see for miles across the rolling prairie, but failed to sight what he looked for—the smoke of a breakfast fire. With his fieldglasses he swept the distances with their powerful lenses.

Far to the west he saw a tiny moving speck. The speck grew larger, took the shape of a rider.

THE RIO KID waited, focussing his binoculars on the horseman every few minutes. Finally the rider could be recognized. Senator Phil Langford! The Senator was safe, and Bob Pryor's relief was vast.

About to return and saddle Saber, Pryor thought to give the vast expanse of short-grass country another scrutiny. It was fortunate that he did, for he saw a second rider—this one far behind the first, but on Langford's trail. The second horseman was still too far off for Pryor to identify him. But the implication was clear. For some reason, Langford had quit the hunting party and now was being followed by one of the group.

The Rio Kid waited no longer. He returned to where Saber was staked out, quickly saddled the dun, and swung to saddle. He splashed across the Lost Squaw, lifted his mount to a lope. At first he did not see Senator Langford, then, topping a swell, he saw the rider about half a mile away. At the same instant Pryor heard the crack of a gunshot.

Saber needed no urging. The big

striped dun hit a gallop, and his blue-clad rider jerked his rifle from the saddle-boot. Langford was now running his horse, and shooting back at the rider on his trail with a revolver. The Rio Kid let out an old cavalry yell. Langford heard it and glanced in his direction. Then the Rio Kid saw the other rider appear over a high swell of prairie, riding hard, gun leveled. It was the young hardcase, Pete Saba.

At the sight of the Rio Kid, Pete jerked his roan horse to a quick stop and holstered his six-shooter. He grabbed for his saddle-gun, and opened up. Saber charged on, and the Rio Kid's rifle cracked. Half a dozen shots were fired in the duel before one found its mark.

Then one of the Rio Kid's shots caught Saba in the chest over the heart. The young tough slumped forward. The roan began to buck as Saber galloped close, and Saba was pitched from the saddle. The Rio Kid grabbed up the reins and restrained Saber from attacking the spooked roan, then dropped from the saddle and bent over the fallen man. Pete Saba was dead.

Senator Langford came riding back. He dismounted and grasped Bob Pryor's hand.

"Captain, I was never so glad to see anyone," he said honestly. "I was scared. I thought I was a goner. I haven't fired a gun since the war, and my shooting is rusty."

"What happened, sir?" Pryor asked.

"Believe me, I'm not sure," said Langford.

He was a different man from the cavalry colonel Pryor had known during the War. He had put on weight; he had grown flabby, and his hair and mustache were snow-white. The Senator was now in his middle sixties.

"I accepted the invitation of a man named Bristow to go on a hunt," Langford continued. "Since you didn't arrive, I decided to go on a two- or three-day hunt. Then a rider came out with a message for Bristow, and he returned to Dodge. I stayed with the other three men in the party, expecting them to start back the next day. I still hoped to bag a buffalo. Then last night late, this man rode up to our camp. . . ."

Langford went on to explain that he had rolled up in his blankets, and the others had thought him asleep. But he had heard Pete Saba tell the others that George Bristow wanted them to keep him, Langford, away from Dodge until they received further word. Langford had been alarmed, though he had not understood what was going on. He had played it foxy, not letting on that he had overheard.

Saba and the other three—a Dodge City gambler, a merchant, and a professional buffalo-hunter—had begun drinking. They got drunk, then turned in. Langford had slipped away then, saddling his horse without being discovered. But shortly after sunup he had discovered that he was being followed.

"But for you, Pryor," he concluded grimly, "I'd be dead now. Do you have any idea what it's all about?"

Pryor nodded. "I'm afraid I'm to blame, Senator," he said. "I stumbled onto a crooked game Bristow is working, and he warned me that he'd hold you as a hostage so that I'd stop meddling in his affairs, knowing that you and I are friends. He fears you more than he fears me, I think. A United States Senator could queer his game, no doubt."

"I'll do just that, by thunder!" Langford said, somewhat pompously. "Just what is his game, Pryor?"

PRYOR explained briefly about the affair in Indian Territory, about his encounter with the Bristow crowd, and the rustling raid on the Slash M trail herd. He also told Langford that Laurie Mason believed the Bristow crowd planned to seize a great part of the Wyoming cattle country. He also informed the Senator that the Northern Cheyennes had jumped their reservation and were heading back toward Wyoming.

"It's a new country," he said, "and if a man, or group of men, saw a chance to gain control of it . . . Well, it would be worth the gamble for unscrupulous men.

They'd be seizing an empire, the future value of which can only be guessed."

"But this Indian business?" Langford asked. "How does it fit in?"

"I've only a suspicion," Pryor said. "Bristow is working with a man named Chris Burrell, a one-time Indian trader. My guess is that Burrell hopes the Cheyennes will reach Wyoming, and stir up enough excitement there to screen the activities of the Bristow crowd. I'd gamble that George Bristow plans a showdown with the little ranchers when and if the Cheyennes reach Wyoming. It's not a new game, Senator, this thing of stirring up Indians and having them blamed for the crimes of certain treacherous white men!"

They left Pete Saba's body where it lay, for the other members of the hunting party to locate and bury. They headed toward Dodge City, Senator Langford angrily saying that he would use his influence to thwart George Bristow's scheme.

"I won't rest until I settle with Bristow," Bob Pryor finally said. "But I'd like you to use your influence in another way, sir."

"How's that, Captain?" Langford demanded.

Pryor told him of the suffering of the Northern Cheyennes in Indian Territory, of how they had died of fever and starvation, and that they should be—to save the survivors of the village—returned to their homeland in Wyoming. He explained that they were few in number, no longer strong enough to wage war, and that they would certainly live in peace if unmolested.

"I'll look into it, Pryor."

"It'll take action, Senator—immediate action."

"Too bad they've run. It's an Army matter now."

"Granted," said Captain Pryor. "But in the end, it'll be up to the Indian Bureau. The Bureau has the final decision in dealing with the tribes."

Langford gave his young companion a smile. "Still pushy, aren't you, Captain?" he said. "Well, I'll try. I'll leave for Lawrence, Kansas, on the earliest train, and have a talk with Ferguson, the superintendent of Indian Affairs. And I'll do my level best."

The Rio Kid nodded. No man could do more than his best, and he himself had kept his word to old Dull Knife. . . .

THEY got back to Dodge in time for Senator Langford to pack his belongings at the Kansas House and catch the eastbound train. The Rio Kid saw him off and, at the last minute, apologized for ruining the Senator's vacation. By then, late afternoon, all Dodge City and a large part of Kansas knew that a band of Indians was headed in that direction. There was increasing excitement, but as yet no hysteria. Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp were urging the citizens to be calm.

The Rio Kid learned from the two lawmen that two big bunches of Dodge City toughs—one led by Chris Burrell and Matt Rigby, the other by George Bristow—had left town that morning. Burrell and Rigby had taken their crowd out at dawn, and Bristow had followed with his men at mid-morning. Wyatt Earp had questioned Bristow, and the man had blandly claimed he was heading for Wyoming to protect his B77 Ranch against the Indians.

That bit of information convinced the Rio Kid that he was right in believing that the Bristow crowd meant to wage a range war against the little Wyoming ranchers as soon as the Cheyennes reached the Territory. It would be a showdown fight, and Bristow was importing enough gunmen to the B77 to

make sure of victory.

Pryor gave a worried thought to the Slash M trail herd. It was protected only by two cowhands, Celestino Mireles and a girl, and they certainly wouldn't be able to stand off an attack by either Burrell's band or that led by Bristow himself. Pryor knew that it was too late for him to ride after the Slash M outfit and help guard it. The Bristow crowd would already have overtaken the slow-moving herd, unless Mireles had somehow managed to elude those riders.

BUT the Rio Kid knew that he would have to take the trail to Wyoming Territory sooner or later, if he wished to attempt to smash the plans of the Bristow crowd. He decided, however, to remain in Dodge until he was sure from the inflowing reports whether or not the Cheyennes were able to continue their flight toward Wyoming. Bristow's showdown plans depended on the tribe's progress, and Bob Pryor now realized that it would be better if the Cheyennes were apprehended.

The Cheyenne village raced on. Braves, squaws, and children outraced the pursuing cavalry, two troops from Reno under command of Captain Mowbrey, and seemed to travel more swiftly than the wind.

Only the telegraph was faster, and the wires hummed with alarms and warnings. Riders spread the news farther, and now across Kansas hysteria built up. The news was carried across the nation by telegraph, and millions of people suddenly read in their newspapers of the onrushing Cheyenne tribe.

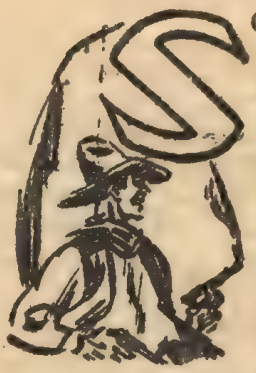
Few people knew, though, as did the Rio Kid, just why the Indians were sweeping north across the plains that extended like a sea of grass for hundreds of miles. To most people, all Indians were savage warriors. It was difficult to believe that these three hundred souls, these copper-hued and backward people, could want merely freedom.

Late that day a cowhand from a ranch on the Medicine Lodge came galloping into Dodge, yelling as he came. The Rio Kid ran from the sheriff's office with Masterson and Earp to learn what the excitement was about, for the cowhand had drawn a crowd that choked Front Street from buildings to railroad.

"Indians, I'm tellin' yuh!" the rider kept shouting. "Hundreds of 'em! Down on the Medicine Lodge—between here and the Kansas line!"

CHAPTER IX

The Red Tide



SO it started.

The cowhand sowed the seed of hysteria, and he had hardly gone into a saloon for the drink he claimed to need so badly before word of the Indians on Dodge's doorstep, as it were, spread to every shady corner of the town. Men became rowdier, louder, drank heavier. More guns appeared on Front Street than ever before, and there was talk—mostly among the Indian-hating Texans—of riding out and doing what the Army had failed to do, stop the Cheyennes in their tracks.

Finally some of more restless townsmen were calling on Bat Masterson to form a posse to go after the Indians. Masterson made a speech on the street, telling the aroused citizens that it was not the job of a sheriff's posse and that, as far as he was concerned, he was en-

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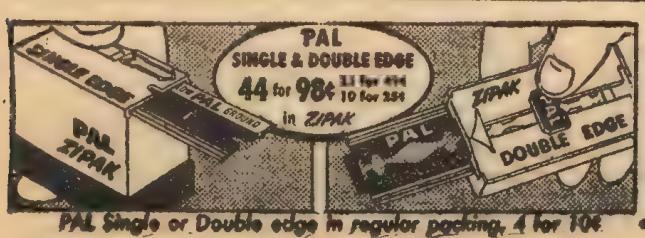

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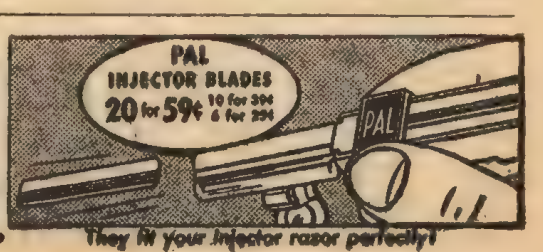

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tirely willing to let the soldiers have the honor.

The Army at Fort Dodge was making preparation.

A train made up of flatcars rolled west from Dodge. The cars were loaded with infantry armed with howitzers. This maneuver angered Dodge's population, for the Cheyennes were, if the cowhand who had seen them knew his geography, southeast of the town, and the soldiers were heading west!

That night a soldier on a dead-beat horse came into Dodge from the south. He was from Fort Reno. He had been with the two troops of cavalry trailing the Cheyennes, and he was carrying a dispatch to Fort Dodge. Captain Mowbrey, in command of the pursuing cavalry, wanted reinforcements from the fort. The weary soldier answered a hundred questions before the throng gave him a drink and permitted him to ride on to the military post. At Fort Dodge, the officers made plans to send infantry mounted on mules to reinforce Mowbrey.

As the night lengthened more and more riders came in to report having seen the Indians. The Cheyennes were said to be at a dozen different parts of southern Kansas, raiding and burning, killing and looting. The reports were false, but they were not to be proved so until after the hysteria eased.

The truth was even more shocking when it reached Dodge, along with the false reports, because it proved that the Cheyennes were capable of fighting and defeating the cavalry. Captain Mowbrey had attacked the Cheyennes on the Medicine Lodge, and after the short, sharp fight with the Dog Soldiers Mowbrey counted five soldiers and three Araphoe scouts dead and nearly thirty of his troopers wounded.

The truth was fantastic at the time, and incredible even after tally was taken.

The Cheyennes swung sharply west after the fight with Mowbrey, and ran into a detail of mounted infantry from Fort Dodge. Again there was a sharp fight, with losses for the Army and few, if any, for the Dog Soldiers.

The truth became more fantastic with the defeat of the posse Bat Masterson led out from Dodge City, under pressure of the citizens, for the posse was made up of what were supposedly the toughest men on earth. Texas cowhands, muleskinners, tinhorn gamblers, renegades, hardy townsmen, gun-quick hardcases—with Masterson, the sheriff, a noted gunfighter. The posse wanted to fight Indians. They fought them and fled, leaving their own dead and wounded behind.

The truth took another nightmarish turn in the vicinity of wild Dodge City when Captain Mowbrey's cavalry came up and joined a second detail from Fort Dodge and the Dodge City posse. In the darkness of an outlandish night the merged forces blundered into the Cheyenne village on the move like ghosts through the dark. Here was another battle, with the posse again being humbled and the infantry from Fort Dodge taking losses that hurt and Captain Mowbrey with his trail- and battle-weary cavalrymen losing their quarry for good.

For when the truth was known in Dodge City, the Cheyennes were still free, and the question that was asked innumerable times, in panic, was:

"Where are the Cheyennes now?"

Neither the Rio Kid nor Wyatt Earp had ridden with the posse that Sheriff Bat Masterson had unwillingly led against the Cheyennes. The Rio Kid remained in town because he was convinced that the Indians would not attack Dodge City, because he believed that the Army would not welcome the interference of civilians, and because in his heart he felt sympathie toward the Cheyennes.

THE marshal remained behind because it was his job to maintain a semblance of law and order in the town, and because it was his nature not to grow excited over something so patently not his affair. Earp went about his business along Front Street, and he and the Rio Kid were the only calm men in Dodge City.

When the humbled posse returned after two days and a night of hunting and fighting the Dog Soldiers, the truth became clear to Dodge City. The possemen had ridden out with a lot of noise, yelling and shooting off their guns, running their horses. They returned in shamefaced silence with their wounded. Their dead they had buried where death had struck through the instrument of Cheyenne bullet, arrow, or lance. Reluctantly they admitted defeat, and salved their pride by adding that the soldiers, too, had been whipped.

Sheriff Masterson told Bob Pryor and Wyatt Earp that the Dog Soldiers had outmaneuvered the white men, outsmarted and outfought them, and all the while they had been outnumbered and hampered by having to protect their women and children. The Dog Soldiers had even managed to capture an Army supply wagon, to loot it of cartridges before they broke off the fight and raced on across the plains.

The Cheyennes were lost now, lost somewhere in the vast empty plains of western Kansas, but they were certainly heading their tired ponies toward still far-off Wyoming. But there were soldiers ahead of them. A report over the telegraph said that troops from Fort Wallace were marching south to intercept the Cheyennes. Another said that the garrisons of the military posts in Nebraska were ready to take the field. A third said that the famous General Crook had been placed in command of all the troops from Fort Reno in Indian Territory to Fort Keogh deep in Montana Territory, and Crook had twelve thousand solders to call upon.

The truth grew more and more fantastic.

In the sheriff's office at Dodge, the Rio Kid shook hands with Masterson and Earp. "The Indians are the Army's business," he told the two lawmen, "but I'm making George Bristow and and Chris Burrell and the rest of that crowd my business."

They wished him luck, and went out to see him off.

The Rio Kid had some iron rations in his saddle-bag, jerky and hard-tack, and a canteen of water hanging from his saddle. He meant to travel fast, faster than the Cheyennes, and Wyoming Territory was hundreds of miles away.

He gave Masterson and Earp a farewell wave as he swung to the saddle, then headed Saber away from Dodge at a lope. He rode northwest across the empty plains, and along the way he watched for signs of the Slash M trail herd.

Late in the afternoon of his second day on the trail black storm clouds darkened the sky to the northwest and the wind rose. Just before the storm broke, he sighted the trail herd in the distance. He was sure that it was Laurie Mason's herd because of its small size. Few outfits took the trail with so few cattle.

He pushed on through a torrent of windswept rain, and as he neared the herd he heard a rumble that was not thunder. There was thunder booming in the black sky, but this sound seemed close to the earth. Shortly he saw the cause of it. He had a glimpse of cattle stampeding through the rainy gloom.

Just a glimpse.

The spooked cattle swept by him and were gone almost in the short space of a heartbeat, lost in the murky dark of the lashing storm. Saber was running hard in the opposite direction, and when the Rio Kid turned the dun about he realized that he wasn't sure of the exact direction in which the herd was traveling.

He reined in, confused, listened intently. But the drumming of the rain and claps of thunder blotted out all other sound. Lightning blossomed, and in the blue-greenish flash the Rio Kid saw two riders. They were passing without noticing him, but his yell brought them reining about. He recognized Celestino Mireles at once, by his high-peaked sombrero and poncho. The other rider was Laurie Evans. The girl was wearing a slicker and had her hat brim turned down.

"Hola, General mio!" Mireles shouted. "We are glad to see you! There is

trouble—bad trouble!"

"What happened, *amigo?*"

"The herd, it ees gone, General!"

"Spooked by the storm?"

IT was Laurie who replied, chokingly. There were tears as well as raindrops on her cheeks.

"We were attacked just after the storm struck," she said, lifting her voice above the furious roar of the wind and rain. "We'd just driven the cattle into a hollow when I heard somebody yell. It was Nick Glennon, and he shouted, "Lord! Indians!" I rode toward him. He was staring at something on the ground. It was my other hand, Ed Larsen. Ed was dead, with an arrow through his throat. Just then a rifle cracked and Nick died before my eyes. I—I saw some shadowy figures through the rain. I shot at them, but then they disappeared."

"I was driving the spare horses, General," Mireles said as the girl stopped speaking. "The first I knew of the trouble was when the cattle stampeded past me. I managed to keep the remuda from running. Then the senorita came up and told me there were Indians."

"I saw the arrow that killed Nick."

"What about the riders yuh saw?"

"They may have been Indians," she said thickly. "I couldn't be sure. You can't see anything clearly in this storm."

The Rio Kid nodded. "We'll have to wait until it's blown over before tryin' to round up the cattle," he said. "Let's head to where yuh left the hosses."

Mireles led the way, and the grief-stricken Laurie rode beside the Rio Kid. The storm beat at them with increased fury. They found the remuda—eight horses, three used as pack animals, one being Mireles' pinto mare—in a hollow with a clump of scrub cottonwoods at one end of it. They waited out the storm there, but it lashed them for nearly two hours. When it passed over, the sun was almost touching the rim of the prairie to the west. Pryor and Mireles left the girl with the horses and went to look at the bodies of Nick Glennon and Ed Larsen.

They lay close together. Both men had died instantly, Larsen with an arrow through his throat, as Laurie had said, and Glennon with a bullet through his heart.

"What does the General think?" Mireles asked.

"I don't know, " Pryor replied flatly. "I'm goin' to do some looking around."

The heavy rain had washed out all tracks, except for a few in among the cottonwoods. The raiders had been hidden among the trees, watching the trail herd, and perhaps waiting for darkness. The storm had hastened their attack, for the Slash M outfit had swung toward the hollow.

But the murkiness accompanying the storm had served the raiders even better than nightfall. It had masked their identity. For they had not been Indians!

The few hoof marks the Rio Kid and Mireles found were the tracks of shod hoofs, and Indian ponies were never shod with iron. Too, there were a few boot tracks. Indians usually wore moccasins; the Northern Cheyennes always wore moccasins. The Rio Kid also found several cigarette butts, which definitely suggested white men.

"The Bristow crowd," he muttered. "Either the bunch led by Chris Burrell and Matt Rigby or the one George Bristow is heading."

"But the arrow, General?" said Mireles. "*La flecha?*"

"A ruse. To make it look like an Indian attack."

"They wanted the cattle, then, these white *renegados?*

The Rio Kid nodded. "I've a hunch we won't find the herd," he said flatly.

He took Laurie with him, leaving Celestino to bury the two dead hands. They rode southeast, with the sun sinking behind them, and far ahead they could see lingering traces of the storm—the black sweep of clouds and lightning flashes. They rode through wide pools of water, across stretches of mud, forded a gully brimful of rushing water, but they saw no tracks of the stampeded herd. The Rio Kid and his companion decided they had misjudged the direc-

tion of the fleeing cattle, and so started circling in the hope of finding sign. But darkness soon came, and they had to give up the search.

"It's no use," Laurie said tonelessly. "Stampeding cattle will often run for miles. And if those Herefords were driven—" She looked at Pryor. "The raiders were white men, after all?"

He nodded.

"The Bristow crowd," Laurie said bitterly. "Two men dead and the cattle lost. How will I ever face my father?"

"Don't blame yoreself," the Rio Kid told her.

They rode back to the hollow.

Mireles had used an ax to open the earth, and he had filled in the two graves with his bare hands.

CHAPTER X

Slash M Ranch

ALL that night the three traveled, taking only the pack horses with them, halting only when the sun came up. They were forced to halt then, to rest the animals, and they made their camp well back from the trail that ran from Dodge City to Fort Wallace. They made a fire to cook a meal, then scattered it as soon as they had eaten. The Rio Kid didn't want the smoke of a fire to reveal their whereabouts to any Bristow riders.

He and Mireles permitted the girl to sleep throughout the morning, but they spelled each other at keeping watch. They broke camp and started out again early in the afternoon. Later in the day they sighted a large body of troops marching south from Fort Wallace.

It was the Nineteenth Infantry, Colonel Lewiston in command, with a small group of cavalry and several Pawnee scouts ranging ahead and half a dozen wagons bringing up the rear. The infantrymen marched in fours, moving smartly, and Captain Bob Pryor, halting to talk with Lewiston and several of his officers, learned that they expected to march thirty miles that day.

Lewiston questioned Pryor about the Cheyennes, and was surprised to learn that several bloody fights had occurred close to Dodge City with the Indians still not apprehended. The colonel was brusque of manner, sure of himself and his troops.

"The Nineteenth will round those hostiles up in short order," he said confidently."

He listened politely as Pryor told him about the raid upon the Slash M trail outfit and the theft of the cattle, but it was obvious that Colonel Lewiston was a man who would tackle but one problem at a time. He was interested only in intercepting the Cheyennes, and he was not going to let a report of white renegades distract him. He rode on at the head of his troops—to meet death at the hands of the Dog Soldiers. . . .

The Rio Kid and his two companions traveled as fast as they could without running their horses to death. They made their night halts in open country mostly, but occasionally stopped at an isolated ranch headquarters or some small settlement.

They learned that a band of a dozen riders with pack animals was traveling a day ahead of them, and Bob Pryor knew, from a description of the leader of the group, that they were following George Bristow. He was convinced then that Chris Burrell had led the raiders who jumped the Slash M herd during the storm, since that bunch could not have passed them on the trail following the rustling raid.

Not wanting to overtake the crowd ahead, the Rio Kid and his companions turned westward and followed a cattle trail to Cheyenne. They found that town as much excited about the Indian warfare in Kansas as about the gold being discovered in the Black Hills. They rested a day in Cheyenne, then took the road that led north to Fort Laramie. Soon they were in the long-grass country of Wyoming Territory, and close

to the Slash M ranch.

They saw the ranch headquarters, log-and-stone buildings nestling in the bow of some low hills, in the thickening dusk. The range spread out through the broadening valley, and bunches of long-horn cattle were scattered across it. There were horses in a fenced meadow. It was a good ranch, the Rio Kid saw, and he could understand why Laurie's father would not sell it for any price. It was the sort of spread a man dreamed of owning and, once he owned it, any cowman of spirit would fight to hold it.

A voice called a challenge as the three riders approached:

"Name yoreselves, hombres!" It was a Texas voice, by its drawl. "Name yoreselves, because I've got yuh covered!"

Laurie answered, "It's Laurie, Hank!" she called.

A lanky old cowhand stepped from the log barn with a rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Danged if it ain't!" the old-timer said. He lifted his voice, bellowed: "Sam! Sam, yore gallivantin' daughter's home!" But almost at once, Hank said, "That ain't Nick and Ed with yuh, girl!"

There was little pleasure in this homecoming for Laurie Mason. Her face clouded, and she spoke huskily, reining in.

"I've bad news, Hank. Nick and Ed were killed by rustlers."

Old Hank swore under his breath. "And those rustlers got the Herefords, eh?"

LAURIE nodded, dismounted. She introduced the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles to Hank Rawlins, then turned across the ranchyard to the house. A stocky man with gray hair, and mustache came from the house and waited on the porch. He walked with a cane. Evidently Sam Mason had not fully recovered from his wound.

Laurie ran the last few steps, leaped onto the porch, and threw her arms about her father. She cried a little, womanlike.

"It's all right, honey," Sam Mason was saying, as Pryor and Mireles walked over. "I'm to blame. I shouldn't have let yuh risk it. It's all right." His voice was choked, filled with emotion.

Sam Mason was a sturdy little man in his middle fifties, and he could take trouble in his stride, despite his game leg. After comforting his daughter, he offered his hand to Captain Bob Pryor and Mireles. He thanked them for having given Laurie a helping hand, told them that they were welcome to Slash M, then added, with a wry grin:

"But it shore ain't a healthy place. Hank and I never sleep at the same time. One of us always stands guard, against that no-good B Seventy-seven outfit."

He was hiding what he felt about the loss of Nick Glennon and Ed Larsen, men who had died simply because they were loyal to him and his two-bit outfit. And he did not mention the loss of the two hundred head of expensive Hereford cattle.

He left Hank Rawlins outside to keep watch—Sam feared another attempt on his life—and took his visitors into the house. Laurie disappeared into her bedroom, to wash up and get into a dress, she had told them. The three men seated themselves in the lamp-lighted living room, and the Rio Kid told Sam Mason about the trouble in Kansas.

"Heard there was Injun fightin'," old Sam drawled. "A rider up from Cheyenne stopped by yesterday and told us the news. But I'm more scared about the Bristow crowd. I'm tellin' yuh, Cap'n, that B Seventy-seven is a range-grabbing outfit if there ever was one. It's worse than any I ever heard of in Texas, even in the days right after the war!"

"I agree with yuh," Pryor said. "I had a run-in with George Bristow and his right-hand man, Chris Burrell."

Sam swore upon hearing the name Burrell. "That hombre is an out-and-out renegade," he muttered. "Had a tradin' post up on the Powder until the Army moved the Northern Cheyennes down to Injun Territory. Lived like a king, Burrell did, till then. He sold guns and

whisky to the Sioux as well as to the Cheyennes, till the Sioux pulled out for Canada. Yuh hear what happened to his tradin'-post?"

The Rio Kid shook his head.

"What ees thees story, senor?" Mireles asked.

Sam Mason filled and lighted his pipe.

"Well," he began as he launched into his story, "some of us Texas settlers knew Burrell was furnishing the Injuns with the two things that make redskins dangerous—whisky and guns. We'd all suffered raids by bands of hostiles, and fought 'em off as best we could. When the soldiers ran the Sioux north to Canada and took the Cheyennes south, some of the ranchers decided to finish the job. They aimed to hang Chris Burrell for a renegade white, but Burrell gave 'em the slip. So they just burned his buildin's to the ground.

"Seems as though all the money Burrell had made over the years was lost in the fire. He didn't have time to take it with him when he hightailed. Most of it was in gold and silver specie, and since the fire couldn't have turned hard cash into ashes, some of the ranchers must've helped themselves. Anyway, Burrell blamed the ranchers for robbing him. Truth is, a couple of the boys who'd put the tradin'-post to the torch did leave for parts unknown right after the fire."

"So Burrell lost everything?" the Rio Kid said.

"That's right."

"A man like Burrell would want revenge," Pryor said. "No matter how long it would take, he'd try to get revenge. That's probably why he threw in with the Bristow crowd. Mebbe gettin' control of the whole range here was his idea—one he made George Bristow believe was foolproof. And he figured on this Indian trouble to work to his advantage. Sam Mason, we can count on a showdown fight with the Bristow-Burrell crowd when the Cheyennes show up in these parts."

"Shucks, Cap'n. They'll never get this far!"

"Don't be too shore of that," the Rio Kid said gravely. "Chris Burrell is countin' on it, and he knows the Cheyennes better than any white man. George Bristow is gamblin' on it. He's already at the B Seventy-seven with a bunch of gunfighters—or on his way there. Look! What kind of a man is his stepson, Dick Bristow?"

SAM MASON'S face clouded.

"At first, I took him for a decent hombre," he said sourly. "But he kept pesterin' me to sell out, at a steal price, like he pestered most of the other little ranchers. He even tried to get Laurie to talk me into sellin'. It made Laurie mad, and she told Dick not to come courtin' her any more. It was after she told him that I got shot from ambush. I'm not sayin' Dick Bristow bushwhacked me, but it must have been a B Seventy-seven hand—and yuh shore can't like a man who bosses a bunch of bushwhackers!"

On the same night that the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles arrived at the Slash M with Laurie Mason, General Crook and his twelve thousand soldiers set a trap for the Northern Cheyennes. The Dog Soldiers had fought twice more in Kansas after defeating Colonel Lewiston's command and a third time over the line in Nebraska. Then for several days they were lost to the Army except for reports from cowhands, ranchers, drifters, and an occasional settler. From these reports, Crook knew that the fleeing tribe would shortly cross the Platte River.

He concentrated many of his troops along that stream while two troop trains patrolled back and forth along a couple of hundred miles of the UP Railroad. Other details were in pursuit up from Kansas and from the military posts in Nebraska and were helping to close the trap. Crook was confident.

He was the man who had defeated the Apaches and the Sioux, and he was perhaps the best of the Indian-fighting generals. He was a shaggy-bearded man who liked to wear buckskin and ride a mule while in the field. He was a man of inordinate confidence, and he had confidence in his trap.

Since the tribe would travel in but one direction—north, always north—the one opening in the trap for the Indians was between the towns of North Platte and Sidney, a stretch of about one hundred and fifty miles. Within that stretch General Crook mobilized enough troops and armed civilians to keep a jackrabbit from slipping through.

Midway between the two towns was the settlement of Ogallala, and here two companies of cavalry, reinforced by civilians, kept watch. And here at Ogallala, in the dark of night, the Cheyennes slipped by under the very noses of the waiting white men. In the morning there were only tracks to mark their passing, and the body of a dog that would have sounded an alarm had not a Dog Soldier quietly killed it with his bare hands.

Now Crook could lose his temper.

For the trap had failed, and only emptiness lay ahead of the Cheyennes. The Indians were lost even to Crook, with his maps and his clattering telegraph keys. . . . .

Down in Kansas, when the tally was taken after the hysteria passed, it was learned that not a single rancher, cowhand, settler, or townsman had been harmed by the Cheyennes. Horses had been taken for mounts, cattle killed for food. But the only white men killed or wounded were among those who had attempted to halt the flight of the tribe.

But once the Cheyennes disappeared beyond Ogallala, terror swept through the cattle country of Wyoming Territory. Ranches were raided, burned. Ranchers and their families were killed. Cattle disappeared between dusk and dawn.

The terror struck always at night. The Cheyennes were blamed.

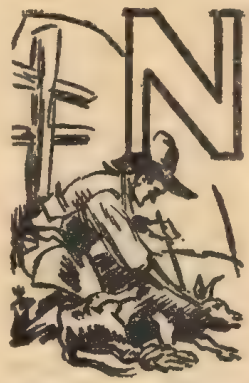
The ranchers were settled on land that once had been home to the tribe of Dull Knife and Little Wolf, so there was hardly a question but that these were Indian raids.

Survivors of the raids came to the Slash M, for Sam Mason was the unofficial leader of the nester-ranchers. The refugees came without food or belongings, by horse, by wagon, some afoot. The night raiders struck so suddenly, with gun and torch, that the victims were lucky to escape with their lives—and some did not.

Sam Mason put them up as best he could, and fed them as well as he could. Indians? The refugees were certain of it. They had seen the naked, painted warriors.

CHAPTER XI

Face to Face



NERVOUSLY the Slash M awaited its turn, and became an armed camp. Sam Mason, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles organized the men among the refugees as a fighting force and made plans for meeting the expected raid. The Rio Kid was sure that the raiders were white men—the Bristow-Burrell gunfighters—rather than Indians, but he did not argue the point. Red warriors or white renegades, they would have to be fought off if the Slash M should be attacked.

The Rio Kid and his Mexican trailmate also scouted the surrounding country, and failed to see any Indians. They visited several burned-out ranch headquarters, and did find Indian sign. They found arrows. They found a broken lance, and a buffalo-hide shield. It was evidence that most men would have accepted without question.

"Indians, sure, General!" Celestino Mireles exclaimed.

Pryor shook his head. "I don't believe it," he said. "This is the work of white men, and they want the world to believe it's Indians' deviltry. I can see Chris Burrell's hand in it. He planted this Indian stuff to make it look like an Indian raid."

"But some of the ranchers saw Indians, General."

"White men rigged out as Indians, *amigo*."

"You have no doubt?"

"But I haven't any proof, either," the Rio Kid admitted.

"What we do now, General?"

"We're goin' to do some spyin' on the B Seventy-seven!"

The B Seventy-seven Ranch was north of the Mason spread, beyond a range of low hills, and as the two *compadres* rode warily through the hills, rifles across their saddles, they caught sight of a strange rider.

He was traveling south at a hard lope, and the Rio Kid and Mireles rode to intercept him. He reined in at once when the Rio Kid shouted:

"Pull up, mister! We want a word with yuh!"

The rider was a good-looking young fellow. He was wearing a fine pearl-gray Stetson, dark gray military-type breeches, flat-heeled boots with a high polish, and a belted tweed coat that looked like the handiwork of a skilled tailor. He was riding a sorrel horse marked with the B77 iron, but obviously he was not an ordinary cowhand. He was too dudishly dressed even to be a hired gunfighter. There was a rifle on his saddle, but he did not reach for it, and he wore no six-shooter.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

The Rio Kid took a guess. "Yuh're Dick Bristow?"

"That's right."

"Good," the Rio Kid said flatly and repeated: "We want a talk with yuh. My name's Pryor. I'm also known as the Rio Kid. This is my *compadre*, Celestino Mireles. Mebbe yuh've heard of us."

Dick Bristow frowned. "I can't say that I have."

"Yore step-father didn't mention our names?"

"No," said the boss of the B77 brusquely. "George Bristow never spoke of you, and I'm not interested in you. I'm in a hurry and—"

"Where ees the senor riding?" Mireles asked.

Dick Bristow scowled at him. "Look—I don't need to answer a lot of fool questions. And I'm not going to waste time with a couple of nosy strangers."

He lifted his reins to ride on.

"Senor, please," Mireles said.

Dick Bristow looked at the Mexican again, and a startled look showed in his eyes. For Mireles now had his gun out. It was cocked and leveled at the B77 ranch boss. Mireles was smiling, but his eyes were chill.

"Where ees the senor riding?" he asked again.

Dick Bristow was more angry than frightened. "If it's any of your business, I'm headed for the Slash M," he muttered.

Mireles glanced at the Rio Kid.

"What do yuh want there, Bristow?" he demanded. "The Masons no longer consider yuh a friend."

Hurt showed in the young man's eyes. "You're right. Sam blames me for bushwhacking him or for having him bushwhacked. And Laurie is . . . Well, she thinks I was out to cheat Sam. All I did

[*Turn page*]

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was to follow George Bristow's orders when I tried to buy the Slash M." He stared at the Rio Kid. "You two are friends of the Masons?"

Pryor nodded. "What do yuh want there?" he asked a second time.

"I've been worried about the Masons," Dick Bristow said anxiously. "I know they won't welcome me, but I want to urge them to come and stay at the B Seventy-seven until this Indian trouble is over, so that they'll be safe."

"Safe!" exclaimed the Rio Kid. "Why, blast it, it's yore crowd that's doin' the raidin'—not any Indians!" His anger for the entire Bristow crowd was suddenly focused upon young Dick Bristow. "What yuh tryin' to pull on the Masons, anyway?"

DICK BRISTOW looked as startled as though the Rio Kid had leaned from the saddle and slapped him across the face.

"That's a lie," he said thickly. "And if you've made the Masons believe such a thing—"

"Yuh see any hostile Indians, mister?" the Rio Kid cut in.

"I—well, no."

"But yuh have seen the gunfighters George Bristow brought up from Dodge City, haven't yuh?"

Dick noded jerkily. "But what you're saying is crazy!" he said. "My stepfather brought those men to help guard the B Seventy-seven against Indian attack. He knew that the Cheyennes had left their reservation and were heading for this part of the country. They've done just that. And we've kept the Cheyennes from raiding our ranch, with the help of those Dodge City men."

"Yore ranch hasn't been raided because George Bristow's men are doin' the raidin'," Bob Pryor retorted. "Mebbe yuh don't know what's goin' on. I'm beginnin' to think yuh don't. But it's shore about time yuh woke up to the game George Bristow is playin'."

"You want to accuse him to his face, Pryor?"

"What good would that do? He'd just deny it."

"Maybe he would deny it, even if it was true," said Dick Bristow. "But I'd know if he was lying."

"And if yuh caught him lyin'?" Pryor asked. "What then?"

"Why, I—I'd see to it that he quits this game," Dick said uncertainly. "But he wouldn't lie. He's not guilty of such a thing." He shook his head. "He couldn't be. What would it get him?"

"The whole of this range, mebbe," the Rio Kid said simply.

Dick Bristow's handsome face showed a look of shock, and the first doubt of his stepfather's innocence. "I'm riding back to B Seventy-seven headquarters and put it to him," he said hollowly. He lifted the reins and swung his sorrel about. Then he halted, and demanded, "You got nerve enough to come and face him, Pryor?"

"Shore," said the Rio Kid. "I'm comin'."

"General, maybe thees ees a trap," Mireles muttered.

"If it's a trap, this hombre will stop the first bullet when I try to shoot my way out of it," the Rio Kid replied. "You, amigo, go back to the Slash M and tell Sam Mason where I've gone. And tell him to keep a double guard against trouble till I get back."

Mireles wanted to protest against his friend's making such a brash move as this, but he kept silent. The youthful Mexican knew that when the Rio Kid decided upon a certain course no one could change his mind. Mireles watched Bob Pryor ride off with Dick Bristow. Then, shaking his head over his *compadre's* seeming foolhardiness, he turned his horse back toward the Slash M. . . .

Coming down onto B77 range, the Rio Kid saw two different bunches of riders in the distance. The horsemen might be keeping watch for marauding hostiles, but it was more likely, the Rio Kid was sure, that they were taking steps to guard against any of the neighboring ranchers spying upon the activities of the Bristow crowd.

The Rio Kid was a good judge of men, and he was inclined to believe that Dick Bristow did not know just what

his stepfather an' Chris Burrell were pulling here in Wyoming Territory. Dick was naturally prejudiced in the man's favor; perhaps he had a great affection for his stepfather. Too, he was a young man—certainly under twenty-five—and youth was always trusting. And the Rio Kid was sure that Dick was an Easterner not long enough in the cattle country to be aware that bloody wars had been fought for rangeland.

It was perhaps half a dozen miles across B77 range to the ranch headquarters. On the way the Rio Kid saw great numbers of cattle, in scattered bunches, but he was sure that they would all be in the B77 iron. The cattle being run off the raided ranches would be taken to some isolated hide-out, not held on B77 range.

The headquarters of the B77 stood in a broad hollow with a nearby tree-fringed stream. The buildings were like most in the Wyoming cattle country, chinked log on stone foundations, and they were large and solidly constructed.

THE RIO KID was alert, riding in with Dick Bristow, but he saw only a couple of hands around the place. Dick swung over to the long, low ranch house. They dismounted, the Rio Kid letting the easily aroused Saber stand ground-hitched some distance from Dick Bristow's sorrel. They climbed stone steps to the roofed porch, crossed to the door, entered the well-furnished house. There was a wide hallway, an enormous living room to the right of it, and an office to the left.

George Bristow was in the office, seated at a desk, going over the ranch tally books. He showed no surprise upon seeing the Rio Kid, but he had, Pryor realized, watched Dick and him ride up from the window opposite the desk. Now Bristow took a cigar from his pocket, bit off its end, lighted up, and leaned comfortably back in his chair.

"What's on your mind, son?" he finally asked.

"You know this man, sir?" Dick countered.

"I've met him," said Bristow. "Pryor is the name, isn't it?" He questioned the Rio Kid. "Captain Pryor? Or so you call yourself." He was his usual cool self. He looked back at Dick. "I've met Pryor and I've heard about him. He wears a uniform, but I understand that he no longer holds a commission in the Army. He's something of an adventurer. And, being an adventurer, he's apt to be a spinner of tall tales. You'll meet his kind here in the West, son. Professional heroes, I might call them. Like this fellow known as Buffalo Bill. Don't take them at their own evaluation, my boy."

Pryor's face was rocky. "That's a polite way of calling a man a liar, Bristow," he said. "And yuh're good at that, and at covering up for yoreself. I've told Dick what yore up to. Now it's up to you to prove me wrong."

"You're taking this man's word against mine, Dick?"

"I can't see what reason he'd have for lying to me, sir."

"I told you he's an adventurer. A trouble-maker."

"Yuh deny yuh're out to steal the whole of this range, Bristow?" Pryor broke in. He didn't wait for a reply, for Bristow's denial could be taken for granted. "Where's Burrell, Bristow?"

"Burrell?" the man muttered. "Should I know?"

"I'm shore he's leadin' the wild bunch that's raidin' the two-bit ranchers," accused the Rio Kid. "And that he's yore partner in this ugly business. Bristow, I'm goin' to prove that white men are pullin' these raids, and I'm goin' to prove that you ordered them!"

"Dick, you know what I think?"

"What, sir?"

"I think this man is trying to blackmail me," said Bristow, suddenly rising. "Pryor, I'm giving you fair warning. Stop slandering me. Quit making outrageous accusations against me. Get out of this country within twenty-four hours, for at the end of that time I'm going to take the law into my hands!"

It was no more than he should have anticipated, the Rio Kid realized. He had tried before to force an admission from the man, and had been outwitted.

George Bristow was too shrewd to be tricked by words alone. And the threat of a gun would not frighten him into admitting guilt. But there was still a chance that Dick Bristow might sense that his stepfather was covering up his perfidy.

Turning to the younger Bristow, Pryor said bluntly, "All right, Dick. Yuh said yuh'd know whether or not he was lyin'."

Dick was staring at his stepfather.

"Pryor," he said, "you've got twenty-four hours to get out of this country. This time tomorrow, I'm going to have my crew make sure you've cleared out. If you're still around . . . Get out, Pryor. Get out!"

The Rio Kid was not surprised. These two men were not of the same flesh and blood, but they were bound together by father-and-son ties. George Bristow could lie, and Dick Bristow would be deceived.

"You've made yore threat and I've made mine," Pryor said. "We'll see who carries his out."

He turned to the door, then halted as George Bristow said, "One moment, Pryor." The Rio Kid waited. George Bristow said, tauntingly, "I'm curious, Captain. How much did you expect to blackmail me for?"

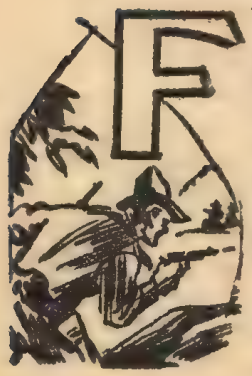
"Yuh offerin' me a bribe, Bristow?"

"A bribe, Captain? For what?"

"For not smashin' yore range-steal," Pryor said, and went out.

CHAPTER XII

Unexpected Ally



FURIOUSLY the Rio Kid strode from the big loghouse, mounted Saber, and rode out at a lope. He was angry still, and mostly at himself for having let George Bristow make him appear a fool for a second time. He had accomplished nothing by coming to the B77 Ranch. Nothing except having learned that young Dick Bristow was in the dark so far as his stepfather's plans were concerned.

Sam Mason and his daughter were wrong about the young man. A B77 hand probably had been the bushwhacker who wounded Sam, on George Bristow's orders, and Dick knew nothing about it.

The Rio Kid realized, too, that Dick knew nothing about George Bristow's partnership with Chris Burrell. Evidently Burrell, who was certainly leading the raids on the two-bit ranches, was not using the B77 as his headquarters. Burrell had a hide-out somewhere.

"I've got to find it, and catch that lobo in his hole!" the Rio Kid told himself.

He was lost in his thoughts and was unaware of the two riders coming along behind him from B77 headquarters until a gun roared and a slug whined close to his head. Saber snorted, reared high. The Rio Kid grabbed out his right-hand gun, shot an alarmed glance over his shoulder.

Two hard-visaged riders were galloping toward him.

Behind them came a third rider—Dick Bristow.

They hadn't waited twenty-four hours, or even twenty-four minutes. The Bristow crowd wanted him dead now!

The Rio Kid neck-reined Saber about, and opened fire. As he shot at the nearest B77 riders, he had a glimpse of a bunch of five others, drawn by the first shot that had been fired, racing in from the southern part of the range. The Rio Kid had faced seemingly certain death many times, yet he had never become immune to fear. Fear was not a matter of cowardice. The Rio Kid was no coward. But the will to live, the urge for self-preservation, was strong within him.

And so now, with the odds against him, he did know fear. But not panic.

He drove Saber toward the two who were already shooting at him, and his sudden charge rattled the pair and

caused them to split up. Crowding the rider swinging off to the right, he opened fire. He saw his first shot target the man, then quickly swung his gun toward the hardcase off to his left. He was surprised to see that one slumped in the saddle, wounded.

The Rio Rid glanced toward Dick Bristow. It was Dick who had fired upon the second man, winging him with a rifle shot!

"Behind you, Pryor!" Dick shouted. "Watch it!'

The Rio Kid swung Saber about and faced the oncoming five. They had their guns out, but they were slow in starting to shoot. Seeing Dick Bristow in the fight, they were not sure of what was happening. While their confusion lasted, Dick came pounding up to fall in alongside the Rio Kid.

"Come on, Pryor!" he said thickly. "I'm going to see that you get safely away from here."

They struck out together, riding hard, and still the five B77 riders failed to shoot. It was apparent that they did not want to open fire on their boss' stepson without having been ordered to do so. And they could not shoot at the Rio Kid without endangering Dick Bristow.

"What's up, Dick?" one yelled. "Why'd you shoot Charlie?"

"Keep out of my way!" Dick shouted.

With the Rio Kid, he galloped past the bewildered bunch. Only the hills were ahead now, and the Rio Kid was sure that once he reached the uplifts he would be safe enough. He looked back and saw that one of the B77 hands was racing north toward the ranch headquarters, for orders. The other four were coming south, keeping the Rio Kid and Dick Bristow in sight.

Reaching the rougher country of the hills, the Rio Kid and his companion took cover among some brush and trees. Using their rifles, they fired a dozen shots at the four riders coming after them. The barrage turned the B77 riders about and sent them fleeing out of range.

"That'll hold 'em for a while," the Rio Kid muttered. "Let's go."

"This is as far as I'm going," Dick replied.

THE RIO KID gave him a searching glance. He knew that Dick had followed and given him a hand because he had discovered the truth about his stepfather. He had figured that Dick had broken with George Bristow. He couldn't understand the youth's reluctance to leave the B77 range.

"Yuh're not goin' to side that bunch?" he demanded.

"I—I don't know what to do, Pryor," Dick said miserably. He was a shocked and disillusioned young man. "As soon as you rode out, George Bristow called those two riders over and told them to gun you down. I knew then that he feared you, and that your accusations were true. I—I told him that I was done with him. Done with the B Seventy-seven outfit. He called me a fool. A weakling. He said that a man has to be strong and ruthless to get anywhere in this world. He was like a stranger. I realized that I'd never really known him. I rode after those two hands to save your life, but now . . . Well, until now George Bristow was a man I admired. I don't see how I can turn against him."

"It's a decision yuh'll have to make for yoreself, Dick."

"If I could reason with him . . ."

"He's gone too far to back down now," the Rio Kid said. "He's got to go through with what he's started, and either win out or lose all. Nothin' you could say would stop him. Nothin' but death will stop him!"

"I'd rather see him dead than have him go on killing and plundering. I'd rather kill him myself!"

"Try it and yuh'll get killed," the Rio Kid said sharply. "Don't think George Bristow will let yuh ride across B Seventy-seven again. There are no ties of flesh and blood between you two. Yuh're only his stepson, and yuh killed whatever feelin' he had for yuh by turnin' against him. He probably hates you now more than he hates me."

"I was with him a long time, Pryor," Dick said huskily. "I was only twelve

when he married my mother. Even after her death, he treated me like a son."

"He's changed. It's too bad, but that's all over."

"You're right," Dick said slowly. "But it seems like my duty to—to stop him before he does more harm." His handsome face looked suddenly older, more mature. He added, after a moment's thought, "I'll ride with you. And somehow I'll find a way to end this ugly business!"

They rode on through the hills, toward Slash M range.

Stocky little Sam Mason brandished his cane at Dick Bristow as the two riders reined in before the Slash M ranch house.

"Get off my range, yuh bush-whackin' no-good!" Sam bellowed.

"Take it easy, Sam," the Rio Kid said, chuckling. "Dick's here because I asked him to come. He didn't bushwhack yuh. It was one of the Bristow crowd, likely, but Dick didn't order yuh shot. He's throwin' in with us."

Sam stared at Dick. "He's what?"

Laurie came to the door.

"Dick!" she cried. It was clear that she was in love with the young man in spite of her suspicions of him.

Pryor nudged Dick.

"Go to her, friend," he whispered.

He smiled faintly as Dick dismounted and timidly mounted to the porch. He also felt a mild envy as he always did when seeing a man win an attractive girl. Even a man who followed the vengeance trail could know loneliness and occasionally wish that he could share his life with some good woman. But always Bob Pryor knew that a wife and family were not for an adventurer. Now, dismounting, he gave his attention to Sam Mason.

"It's all right, Sam," he said, low-voiced. "Dick needs friends just now. He's had a bad shock. He found out the truth about the Bristow crowd only today."

"Cuss it, that's hard to swallow!"

"It's the truth. He believed Indians are doin' the raidin'."

"Yuh mean to have me believe that young dude didn't know what them gunfighters were up to when they rode out at night?" Sam demanded.

"George Bristow is playin' it smart," said the Rio Kid. "He's holdin' the toughs he brought up from Dodge on B Seventy-seven range—in reserve, no doubt. Chris Burrell must be leadin' another bunch to do the raidin'. An' Burrell is keepin' away from B Seventy-seven headquarters. He's got a hide-out somewheres. The cattle bein' run off are without a doubt bein' taken into some stretch of back country."

"Dang it, I can fork a hoss again!" Sam growled. "I'll lead every man on my spread over to B Seventy-seven and clean out that Bristow crowd! I'll take a rope along and string George Bristow up!"

"Yuh'd ride into a gun-trap," Pryor said. "Bristow would welcome yore comin'. It'd give his gunfighters a chance to wipe out a couple dozen two-bit ranchers, you included. And I doubt that yore friends would go along with yuh. They're still believin' Indians wiped out their spreads."

"So I should just sit on my tail and wait to get wiped out here?"

"No."

"What, then?"

THE RIO KID smiled. Sam Mason was a salty old rannihan when aroused.

"I figger we've got to round up the Burrell bunch first," he said. "Chris Burrell may be Indian-smart, but he's shore to leave a trail after a raid. I mean to follow it and find his hide-out."

"These ranchers won't go after Burrell if they won't go after Bristow," Sam argued. "How yuh going to win 'em over?"

"They'll take the trail after Indians."

"What Indians?"

The Rio Kid smiled again. "When I scout out Burrell's band, I'll tell the ranchers here that I've found the raider's camp. They'll figger I mean Indians. Once they see their rustled cattle at Burrell's hideout, they'll know they were wrong in blamin' the Indians."

The ferocious scowl faded from Sam Mason's face. "Now yuh're talkin'," he said. "But how yuh goin' to pick up the trail?"

"I'll have to count on luck."

"Luck! George Bristow's got all the luck—in his own pocket!"

"It'll change for him," the Rio Kid prophesied.

Then he stiffened, listened intently. Out across Slash M range gunshots racketed. There were three shots, far-off. It was the signal that one of the ranchers standing watch had sighted trouble.

A dozen of the burned-out ranchers and cowhands were on guard at scattered points through the low hills rimming the Slash M. Another dozen or more were at Slash M headquarters, where a score of women and children had found a haven, waiting for such an alarm. They rushed to their horses as the Rio Kid, followed by Sam Mason and Dick Bristow, came down from the porch. The signal had come from the south hills, and the watchers who had fired the shots had also lighted a signal fire. The thin column of smoke rose lazily against the sky.

"Let's go, men," the Rio Kid said, and mounted Saber.

He headed out fast, gaining a wide lead, and reached the hills, which were little more than a mile to the south, well ahead of the others. When he reached the timbered crest of the hill where the fire burned, the Rio Kid found Celestino Mireles there with the cowhand whose post it was at that point.

"Riders coming, General," Mireles said. "From the south."

Pryor could see the approaching horsemen with his naked eye, but he brought the field-glasses from his saddlebag. Focusing the glasses, he saw that the riders were in uniform and mounted upon gray horses. It was a cavalry detail traveling with pack animals. It was a small detail. Pryor counted twelve troopers and an officer.

"Soldiers," he told Mireles and the cowboy. "Must be scoutin' for the Cheyennes."

The others from Slash M headquarters came up, and Sam Mason was in the lead. The Rio Kid told them that it was not trouble, as they had feared, but a small group of soldiers.

"Sam," he added, "you and Dick Bristow come along with Mireles and me. We'll have a talk with the officer commandin' the detail."

CHAPTER XIII

Renegade Hide-out

RIDING down the slope, the four of them quartered across the range below to intercept the soldiers. The officer halted his command as the four approached. He was a young second lieutenant, and Pryor suspected that he was not long out of West Point.

Pryor introduced himself and his companions, and the lieutenant said, rather stiffly, that he was Lieutenant Danford. Evidently he was one of those officers who viewed civilians with an unwarranted contempt. Bob Pryor sized him up as a spit-and-polish, parade-ground officer—a martinet.

"We're out from Fort Laramie," Danford stated crisply. "Scouting for Indian sign. We've had reports of Indian raids in this part of the country. In fact, I've seen four burned-out ranch headquarters during today's march. It appears that the reports to Laramie weren't exaggerated. I'm rather surprised. Military reports place the Cheyennes farther east, heading toward the Black Hills in the Dakotas."

Before the Rio Kid could reply, Sam Mason burst out:

"Indians ain't the only ones that can burn ranches and run off cattle, soldier-boy! This range is bein' raided by a big band of white renegades, and I'm demandin' that you soldiers do something about it!"

The Rio Kid realized that was the wrong way to handle this military-minded Lieutenant Danford. He could see the officer's quick anger.

"My orders," Danford said stiffly, "are to scout for Indians."

"Injuns, my eye!" growled Sam Mason. "There are no Injuns around here."

"Lieutenant," Pryor broke in, "as a former Army officer I know that you've got to obey orders. But we're up against a bunch of renegades far more dangerous than the Northern Cheyennes the Army is hunting. We've more than forty people at the Slash M Ranch, some of them women and children, who were victims of this renegade band. Other ranch folks didn't escape. They were killed trying to defend their homes. These renegades strike at night, rigged out as Indians, and they're led by a man named Chris Burrell who was once an Indian trader. Burrell knows all the tricks of Indian warfare, and he and his gunmen are too tough for ranchers to handle."

"My orders—" Danford broke in.

Pryon cut him short. "I understand, Lieutenant. I'm not suggesting that you go against your orders. But I'm asking you to report this to your commanding officer at Fort Laramie. If you'd send a courier with a dispatch, I'm sure that the C. O. would send you other orders. Orders to give these ranchers protection."

Danford gave Pryor a more respectful look, taking in the uniform that was, except for insignia, exactly like his own. He must have sensed that the Rio Kid was no ordinary veteran who was reluctant to shed his country's uniform.

"I intend to send a courier to headquarters tonight," he said, less brusquely now. "I'll enclose in my report what you've told me, Pryor. Burrell is the name? Chris Burrell?"

"That's it, Lieutenant," Pryor replied. "And we've reason to believe that George Bristow, owner of the B Seventy-seven outfit, is involved."

"All right. The report will go to Laramie."

"And may something come of it," Pryor said, smiling.

"I'm headed for the Powder River country," Danford said. "If you people here should come upon Indian sign, I'd appreciate it if you'd send word to me—as quickly as possible."

HE lifted his reins, swung his right hand forward in silent command. The detail started out, swinging west. Bob Pryor and his three companions turned back toward the Slash M.

"Those cavalrymen could have helped us," the Rio Kid said, "but you can't get an officer like Danford to go against his orders. It'll take a week or more for Fort Laramie to send us help—if help is comin'—and I've a hunch that we haven't that much time left."

"What do yuh mean?" Sam Mason asked.

"George Bristow knows we're onto his game," said the Rio Kid. "He'll figger we can endanger his whole scheme, and to protect himself, he'll have to move against us."

"A raid on the Slash M?"

"Mebbe."

"Well, we'll be ready for him."

"Not ready enough," the Rio Kid said gravely. "The Bristow-Burrell crowd outnumbers us, and they're all gunfighters. It'd be a losin' fight for us. We've got to tackle Burrell's bunch apart from the crowd at the Seventy-seven headquarters. We've got to get the jump on the enemy."

"We've got to find Burrell's hide-out, eh, General?" Mireles asked.

"That's right, Celestino."

"But how, General?"

"You and I will do some scoutin' tonight," Bob Pryor said.

Dick Bristow had been silent all this while, but now he said:

"Maybe I can help you, Pryor. I've a hunch I know where this Burrell's hide-out is located. . . ."

The three of them rode out at dusk, after supper at the Slash M.

"A couple of days ago," Dick Bristow said, "I overheard my stepfather ordering a hand to saddle a mount for a ride to Ghost Dance Valley. I thought at the time he just wanted the rider to

scout the Ghost Dance for Indians. But I remember that he had the rider in the office just before the man rode out. I've an idea now that George Bristow may have sent a message to someone in that part of the country."

Pryor nodded. "A likely idea. Yuh know how to find that place?"

"Yes. It's about ten miles from the west boundary of the B Seventy-seven."

"What sort of country?"

"Wild country."

Again Pryor nodded. "We'll head for there," he said.

He and Mireles let Dick act as guide. They traveled at a fast pace, all three of them well-mounted, and their direction was northwest. Darkness overtook them. The country grew rougher, mile by mile, and finally they were forced to slow their horses to a walk.

They were traveling through tortuous rock hills. There was a three-quarter moon, however, to give them some light. Now and again a coyote howled at the moon. Finally the three riders halted atop a rocky slope leading down into Ghost Dance Valley.

And saw the glow of a fire that marked a camp.

Chris Burrell's hide-out.

The Rio Kid sent Mireles riding hard back to the Slash M, to tell Sam Mason that the raiders' camp had been located. The young Mexican was to urge Sam to bring a dozen men. "Tell him," the Rio Kid had instructed Mireles, "that we'll attack the hide-out under cover of darkness." His voice had been urgent. "Tell Sam he's not to waste any time!"

Once Mireles was on his way, the Rio Kid and Dick Bristow rode warily down into the Ghost Dance to reconnoiter. They left their horses in a jumble of rocks and brush at the base of the slope, then went on afoot. They moved as quietly as Indians, keeping low to the ground, and finally crouched in a gully within a hundred feet of the campfire.

Two men sat by the fire. They were a hard-visaged pair, and they were passing a jug back and forth. One was a blackbearded man wearing a buckskin shirt. The other wore a corduroy coat against the night chill. His lank face was clean-shaven except for a wispy mustache and a small goatee.

They talked as they drank, arguing drunkenly about which one was to get up and put more wood on the fire. It didn't need fuel, for it was blazing high.

FOR an instant the Rio Kid feared that he had guessed wrong, that the two were just a couple of drifters. Then he saw the gear and provisions, enough for a score of men, stacked to one side of the camp site, and some distance beyond the fire a rope corral in which were a half-dozen spare horses. He knew then that the pair had companions who had ridden off somewhere.

The two hardcases continued to argue, growing loud and angry. Blackbeard swore and said: "It's yore turn, Tyson. I fetched the last brush for that fire, and I'm tellin' yuh, hombre, to do yore share of keepin' that fire goin'!"

"Supposin' I don't?" said Tyson, the thin man with the goatee. "What yuh aimin' to do about it?"

"It ain't what I'll do, hombre."

"No?"

"It's what Burrell will do."

"Yuh think I'm afraid of that white-skinned Injun?"

"Yuh better be," growled Blackbeard. "He wants this fire kept goin' so he can see it from the hills on his way back, and know there's no trouble here. Fetch some brush, hombre!"

The pair argued some more, and finally Tyson dug a coin from the pocket of his corduroy coat.

"We'll toss for it," he said craftily. "Heads you get the brush, tails I stay here. Fair enough?"

Blackbeard thought about it, and finally agreed. The coin was tossed into the air. Both men stared at it.

"Tails!" Tyson said gleefully. "I stay here while you fetch the brush!"

Blackbeard grumbled bad-humoredly, took another drink from the jug, then rose and picked up an ax from the ground. He staggered as he moved, and he came directly toward the gully where

the Rio Kid and Dick Bristow crouched.

Dick hadn't the nerve for this sort of game, and it broke as the burly hard-case neared the gully. Dick leaped up to slip away. Blackbeard let out a startled bellow. He swung the ax up as a weapon and charged at Dick. The Rio Kid grabbed for his right-hand gun, but Dick's rifle cracked. Blackbeard grunted, stopped, stood swaying. He dropped the ax, began to crumple to the ground.

The Rio Kid leapt from the gully, ran toward the fire. Tyson had risen, and now he went for his six-gun.

"Don't try it!" the Rio Kid shouted.

The warning went unheeded.

Tyson's gun came out, and blasted. His shot went wild, and he was about to shoot again when the Rio Kid's gun roared. Tyson spun half around, his knees buckling, then fell loosely to the ground. He was dead when the Rio Kid reached him.

Dick Bristow came over.

"Come on, Pryor," he said edgily. "Let's get away from here!"

"You go back to the slope and keep watch for the ranchers."

"What about you?"

"I've got to stay here," the Rio Kid said flatly. "Yuh heard what this pair was sayin'. This fire has to be kept burnin'. It's a signal to the rest of the Burrell crowd that everything is all right here. Burrell feared that somebody might find this hide-out, and he don't want to ride into a trap. But that's just what he's goin' to do, because I'm goin' to keep this fire burnin."

"I'll stay with you."

The Rio Kid gave Dick a sharp look. The young fellow had been in his first gunfight, and it had left him shaken. But he was game. He had his nerve back. The Rio Kid decided to make it easier for him.

"Somebody's got to meet Mireles, Sam Mason and the others," he said. "Yuh're elected, Dick. If they get here before Burrell and his raiders show up, lead 'em down here. Savvy?"

Dick nodded, and turned away.

Had there been dry wood about for kindling, the Rio Kid could have built up the fire and left it to burn for hours. But there was only brush, and it burned quickly and so had to be fed onto the fire constantly.

To most men, such a situation would have been nerve-wracking.

THERE was danger. Burrell and his men might give no warning of their approach. They might surprise Pryor there in the camp, and against a band of gunfighters he would have slight chance of escaping with his life no matter how valiantly he fought. But he withdrew to the gully to hide after each time he built up the fire, and kept a careful watch.

North through the valley were bunches of cattle. He could see them in the moonlight, and he was sure that they would prove to be the stock driven off raided ranches. He could hear the mournful bawling of the cattle, and guessed that there was not sufficient grass and water for them here in this rock-bound valley.

The time was long, the waiting hard.

It seemed to the Rio Kid that the Slash M were long in coming, and a fear began to gnaw at his mind that George Bristow had picked tonight for the long overdue raid on that ranch. But finally he heard a low whistle, a familiar signal. He answered it in kind, then Mireles came riding up. The Mexican was followed by Dick Bristow and Sam Mason, and behind them rode a dozen of the refugee ranchers and cowhands.

The Rio Kid was vastly relieved.

"Leave yore hosses in the brush on the east side of the gully," he said crisply. "Two men can guard 'em. The rest of yuh take cover in the gully and we'll try to catch the raiders when they ride into their camp."

"That's a white man's camp, Rio Kid," a rancher said.

He nodded. "The men who raided yore ranches are white men, not Indians. If yuh need proof, yuh'll find yore cattle scattered through this valley. The raiders rigged themselves out as Indians, and that's why everybody mistook 'em for hostiles."

It was an astonished bunch of men,

but none doubted Bob Pryor's word.

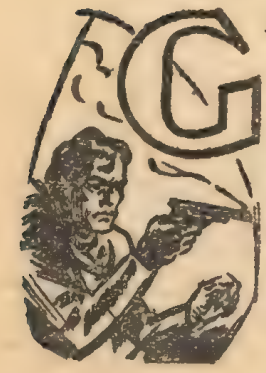
They obeyed his orders, leaving their mounts back in the brush and then taking up positions in the gully. He put more brush on the fire, then went out to the base of the slope where he'd left Saber. When he returned, leading the dun, he sensed a tension in the waiting men.

"General, we hear riders!" Celestino Mireles whispered to him.

The Rio Kid listened intently. There was a far-off drumming of hoofs.

CHAPTER XIV

White "Indians"



GALLOPING in from the west hills, the riders had a couple of miles of flatland to cross They were apparently coming from some raid, an attack upon some ranch that lay west of the rock hills. There was a bawling of cattle that grew louder as the band drew closer, and it was apparent that the raiders were bringing in more stolen stock.

The Rio Kid went from man to man crouching in the gully, telling each one not to start shooting until the order was given by Pryor himself. By the time he had warned the last of the group, the Burrell crowd had left the cattle to shift for themselves and were riding toward the campfire that was drawing them into the trap.

As the first of them appeared in the glow of the fire, the Rio Kid heard a rancher near him grunt with his surprise, and heard another whisper an oath. They had been prepared, but they still hadn't expected to see the raiders rigged out as Indians.

There were fifteen riders, and all but two were so disguised. They were naked to the waist; they had darkened their skin with some sort of stain, and daubed themselves with war paint. Two wore war bonnets. Several had feathers stuck into their hair. In the gloom of night they could be easily mistaken for Indians.

The two not disguised as Indians were Chris Burrell and the bearded Matt Rigby. Burrell carried a Cheyenne bow and a quiver of arrows, and he alone evidently left arrows at the scene of a raid, for all the others were armed with rifles and six-shooters.

"There's Tyson, dead drunk," one of the fake warriors said. "But where's Blake?"

Burrell dismounted, strode to the body of Tyson, kicked it brutally.

When Tyson didn't move, Burrell bent and seized him. He turned the body over onto its back, then recoiled. He straightened.

"He's not drunk! He's dead!" he said in a hollow voice.

"Burrell, yuh're covered!" the Rio Kid called out. "Order yore men to throw down their guns and lift their hands —or we'll start shootin'!"

He knew as he spoke that Chris Burrell would not obey.

Instead all perdition broke out in Ghost Dance Valley.

Matt Rigby started it. The erstwhile hide-hunter bellowed an oath and started a wild shooting in the Rio Kid's direction. The others of the renegade band grabbed for their weapons. At the same time most of the men in the gully, failing to wait for the order, opened up with a raking fire.

Powder flashes glared against the pale glow of moonlight, and the racket of many guns was deafening. The smell of gunsmoke was almost overpowering. Men cursed, screamed. The painted, half-naked renegades charged the gully.

Straight into the blazing rancher guns.

The Rio Kid's twin Colts were crashing, and he saw two of the fake warriors topple from their galloping horses under his fire. On his right, Celestino Mireles had drawn a six-gun from his sash and was shooting methodically. On his left, Dick Bristow fired his rifle as coolly as

any of the revenge-seeking ranchers, but with uncertain success. Behind the Rio Kid, across the gully, Saber snorted and shrilled, rearing high, waiting only his rider's signal to charge into the fray.

Only half a dozen of the gunfighters lived to reach the gully. Sudden panic gripped them when they realized how few they were, and that their two leaders had deserted them. It was true. Chris Burrell and Matt Rigby had not joined in the attack. Those two had started out with their men, Burrell having remounted, but then they had dropped behind and, seeing their wild bunch being cut down, turned in quick flight. The Rio Kid had seen them flee.

The survivors suddenly threw down their rifles and six-guns, lifted empty hands. The ranchers—except for one dead man and two wounded—leaped from the gully to drag them from their mounts and hold them as prisoners. The captives were a sorry-looking lot, sheepish-looking and frightened despite their war paint.

THE RIO KID gave quick orders. Four of his companions were to take the prisoners and wounded to the Slash M and keep the captives there under guard. One rider was to start back to the ranch and order the rest of the men there to start out for the B77 headquarters, for a rendezvous there. A young cowhand volunteered to make the ride.

"I've got a fast hoss," he said. "I won't lose any time on the way."

The Rio Kid nodded. "Lead 'em straight to the B Seventy-seven headquarters," he said. "But watch out for gun-traps once yuh reach Bristow range. We'll meet yuh there."

The cowboy ran to his horse, rode out fast.

"Burrell and Matt Rigby hightailed toward B Seventy-seven," the Rio Kid told Sam Mason and the others. "We won't be able to overtake 'em, so Bristow and his gunfighters will be warned. It'll be a tough fight, but there's no use stoppin' now. Let's finish this thing right."

They were with him to a man.

All except the four guarding the prisoners ran to their horses. The Rio Kid mounted Saber and turned east across Ghost Dance Valley. Mireles came along and rode to his right, and Dick Bristow fell in at his left. There were eight ranchers and cowhands, including Sam Mason, riding hard behind them.

Dick Bristow pointed to a high, steeple-shape rock that reflected the moonlight. It rose several hundred feet above the surrounding hills.

"There's a pass at the base of that spire," Dick said, lifting his voice above the pounding of hoofs and creak of saddle leather. "Burrell and Rigby are sure to have headed for it. It leads directly to B Seventy-seven range."

"Just so we reach it before Bristow is warned and sends his gun-fighters to close it!" the Rio Kid shouted back.

He let Saber out, and the big dun war horse began to outdistance the other mounts. As the Rio Kid drew close to the high-looming rock, he drew his rifle from its saddle-boot. His reins were knotted, ready to be dropped so that he could have both hands free for the rifle. He meant to take that pass, and he hoped he would be in time to take it without a fight.

As he rode along, the Rio Kid thought of how strange and how long the trail had been since he had received Senator Langford's invitation to take part in a buffalo hunt. He had missed the hunt, but he had found adventure. And now, as a hundred times before, he was riding the vengeance trail.

It was that, nothing more or less.

The Rio Kid wanted vengeance, and he wouldn't be satisfied until Chris Burrell went down under his blazing guns. Without Burrell, George Bristow would have been nothing more than a petty schemer lacking the treacherous courage to scourge a vast range with torch and gun. Without Burrell, the Northern Cheyennes might have remained upon their reservation until slow-moving officialdom returned them to their homeland or placed them upon a more suitable reservation. But for Burrell's viciousness the Cheyennes, soldiers, posse-

men, and Wyoming ranchers who had died might still be alive!

Vengeance?

Burrell's death would be poor payment for all those other deaths.

The Rio Kid gained the pass, a narrow cut in the rock cliffs, and found it unguarded. Evidently George Bristow had not anticipated trouble from the direction of Ghost Dance Valley, because of Burrell's camp there. The pass was perhaps a half-mile long, gradually widening. Passing through it, the Rio Kid, and the riders coming along behind him, rode through several miles of timber and brush hills before reaching B77 range.

The Rio Kid waited for the others to come up, then asked Dick Bristow how far it was to the ranch headquarters. Dick told him that it was four or five miles.

"We'll swing a little south instead of headin' directly toward the headquarters," the Rio Kid said. "That will give us a chance to meet our *compadres* comin' up from the Slash M and also help us avoid any riders Bristow sends toward the pass."

He explained that they could round up any pass-bound riders later on, that the important thing was first to catch Bristow and Burrell.

They started out, bearing to the southeast, but had traveled only a half-mile when the Rio Kid called a halt. He ordered the group to dismount and hold their horses. There was a drumming of hoofs, then a bunch of riders appeared across the moonlit range. There were seven of them. They went by at a hard lope without seeing Pryor and his companions. The Rio Kid remounted his band and rode on.

MINUTES later they topped a rise and saw the lighted windows of the ranch headquarters, and were seen in return. A voice shouted a warning down among the buildings. Other voices sounded, excitedly. The lights in the bunkhouse went out, and shortly all but one window in the ranchhouse—the window of the office—went dark.

"Come on, Rio Kid!" Chris Burrell's voice yelled. "Come on, you meddling son. We're ready for you!"

The next instant guns began to crash.

Gun-flashes appeared from a dozen different parts of the ranch headquarters, and the Rio Kid, dismounting and deploying his men, realized that his group was outnumbered. He ordered his comrades to keep up a steady sniping until the other riders from the Slash M showed up. Without reinforcements, he could neither attack nor hold an effective siege.

The firing kept up without either side gaining an advantage. Time slipped away, and the Rio Kid realized that dawn was not far off. If help didn't come from the Slash M shortly, he would have to withdraw his men or find himself in a dangerous position. Daylight would give the B77 gunfighters the edge. Having cover, all they needed was light to show them their targets.

There was a streak of dawn in the eastern sky finally, and the Rio Kid knew he must retreat. He couldn't wait longer. He dared not gamble with the lives of these men. He crept to Sam Mason's position to tell him that they must withdraw, but then Celestino Mireles exclaimed:

"They come, General!"

The Rio Kid whirled and saw the over-due riders—thirteen of them—galloping up through the lingering darkness. They had been pinned down by four B77 men forted up in the hills, and it had taken them an hour to wipe out the interference that blocked their way. They dismounted and dropped to prone shooting position, and joined the others in a heavy shooting. The Rio Kid let the barrage rake the B77 buildings for perhaps five minutes, then ordered his men to cease firing.

"We'll give 'em a chance to surrender now," he said. He cupped his hands to his mouth, shouted: "Bristow! Yuh hear me?"

The B77 men stopped shooting. It was evident that they realized from the heavier gunfire from the ridge that reinforcements had arrived. Knowing the

breed, the Rio Kid was sure that these hired gunfighters and hardcase cowhands were no longer willing to fight for their wages with the odds suddenly against them. He shouted again.

"Call it quits, Bristow! Yuh haven't got a chance!"

There was no reply.

A heavy silence lay over the B77 headquarters.

Then a single shot sounded. It seemed to have been fired inside one of the buildings, for it was somehow muffled.

There was another lengthy silence, and the Rio Kid urged his men to continue to hold their fire. Then there was a pounding of hoofs, and the Rio Kid, leaping to his feet, saw two riders heading west away from the headquarters at a hard lope. The pair vanished into the darkness still shrouding the range.

"Rio Kid, listen!" a voice called out. "We want to give up! Burrell and Rigby killed the boss and ran out on us!"

CHAPTER XV

Squawman's Finish

IT WAS no trick.

After some dickering, in which the gunmen in the house demanded the Rio Kid's promise that they would not be harmed but turned over to the law, nine men marched out with empty hands held high. Two were wounded. One remained behind, having been killed during the fight. Leaving the prisoners under guard by the ranchers, The Rio Kid went to the ranchhouse with Dick Bristow.

They found George Bristow sprawled on the floor of the office. He had been shot through the back of the head, and beside him lay an empty strong-box.

"He had five thousand dollars in that box," Dick said, in a choked-up voice. "Burrell must have known about the money." He was hard hit by the death of his stepfather. But he said, as though thinking aloud, "It was best this way. Better than his having to be hanged."

"Yuh're his only heir?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Yes," Dick replied. "He had no other living relatives. I inherit the Seventy-seven Ranch. I'll make good the losses his victims suffered. If I could only give back life to the ones who died because of him!"

"Don't burden yoreself with his guilt," Pryor told him. "Bury him, then forget him. Yuh've yore own life to live. There's Laurie, Dick. She's in love with yuh. She'll marry yuh. She'll help yuh forget what has happened." His voice hardened. "As for Chris Burrell, leave him to me. . . ."

The Rio Kid rode away from the B77 headquarters with Celestino Mireles as dawn brightened across the Wyoming sky. No good-bys were said, for the Rio Kid expected to return at least briefly to this range he had helped make safe. He expected to overtake the fleeing Chris Burrell and his hardcase companion, Matt Rigby, before the day was gone.

But he underestimated the wily Burrell.

Burrell suspected that he would be pursued, so he traveled fast and did his best to confuse his trail. And he succeeded.

The trail the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles expected to follow but a single day stretched on and on. It twisted one way and another throughout the wildest part of Wyoming Territory. It led east toward Nebraska at one time, then southwest toward Colorado. It swung north toward Montana Territory. The days ran into weeks, the weeks into a month—and still the chase continued.

Sometimes the trail was lost for days, but always the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles picked it up again. Their quarry would find no rest this side of the grave, for their downfall had become an obsession with the vengeance-seeking Rio Kid. He wouldn't give up. His hatred for Chris Burrell became a consuming thing.

He and Mireles had left their trail outfit at the Slash M, but they had bought a pack-horse, camp gear, and provisions from a rancher the second day on the trail. Burrell and Rigby had robbed the same rancher at gunpoint, earlier that same day, of fresh mounts, a pack-horse, and gear and provisions. It was their quarry's habit of stealing horses and food that kept the Rio Kid and his trailmate from losing the trail entirely. Ranchers and settlers remembered thieves.

It had been late summer when the Rio Kid first encountered Chris Burrell, down in Indian Territory, and now, as the search continued, west into the Black Hills in the Dakotas, it was late October. The air was chill, the night wind had a bite to it, and there were occasional snow flurries.

And in all that time the Northern Cheyennes, like Burrell and Rigby, were lost. The Indians left a dim trail, but they themselves were lost to the Army. The Rio Kid and his *compadre* encountered details of troops every few days, searching for the missing Cheyennes.

The trail of Burrell and Rigby led finally to the new gold field in the Hills, to the mushrooming Deadwood, a town as wild and tough as Dodge City, and there was lost again. The two man-hunters searched the gold camps for days, without luck, then by chance questioned a prospector returning from deeper in the Hills. The prospector remembered two men such as the Rio Kid described because they had robbed him of some dust laboriously panned from a mountain stream. The two men had been headed toward the north branch of the Big Cheyenne River.

The Rio Kid and Mireles trailed on through brooding pine forests, forded streams already edged with ice, rode in the shadow of snow-covered peaks. In the early dusk, the day before they hoped to reach the North Branch, they sighted a campfire and approached it warily. It was a cavalry troop in camp, however, and General George Crook himself was there on a tour of inspection of the troops under his command.

GENERAL CROOK welcomed Captain Bob Pryor as an old friend, for they had campaigned together against the Apaches in Arizona Territory. Known to the Indians as "The Gray Fox," Crook was a stalwart six-footer with a bristling gray beard that gave him a ferocious look, while at heart he was a genial man. He seldom wore regulation uniform while in the field, and now was garbed in a plain hunting suit and an old Stetson.

Pryor and Mireles shared mess with Crook and his officers, then afterward the General invited the Rio Kid to his tent. Alone with Pryor, the great soldier revealed that he was a man who worried.

"It's not that I hate the Northern Cheyennes, Captain," he said confidentially. "But I was given a job to do, and so far I've failed. At least, half failed. A courier came in last night with a dispatch from Fort Robinson. Dull Knife and the tribe have been rounded up in the Sand Hills of Nebraska and are being taken as prisoners to Fort Robinson."

Pryor felt a deep sympathy for old Dull Knife.

"Little Wolf came on north with about a hundred and fifty of his people," Crook continued. "I know they're somewhere in the Black Hills, but I can't run them down. Winter is at hand, and that will handicap me even more. I know the Cheyennes want nothing but to be free. I would like to give them their freedom. But I'm only a soldier with orders to obey. And—" he smiled ruefully through his beard—"and I can't admit defeat."

"There's no word from Washington giving you permission to let the Cheyennes remain free, then," Captain Pryor said, thinking that Senator Langford, important official that he was, must have failed to sway the Indian Bureau.

"No word at all," said Crook. "But I keep hoping."

They talked long and of many things, and the Rio Kid told the officer of the range war in Wyoming and about his search for Chris Burrell, the man who

had urged Little Wolf to lead his people from Indian Territory. Crook's eyes glinted with anger, for he hated all white renegades who schemed against the Indians and made trouble that took the lives of soldiers. But before the general could express his opinion of Chris Burrell, a detail of cavalry came into the camp.

Crook and Pryor stepped from the tent and listened to the report of the lieutenant in command of the scouting detail.

"My Sioux scouts picked up some Cheyenne sign, sir," the lieutenant said, "but we failed to find the enemy. We did come upon two white men camped on the North Branch at Red Rock—"

The Rio Kid waited to hear no more.

He went to his horse and swung to the saddle. Mireles mounted his black gelding and caught up the halter rope of their sorrel pack horse.

"I'll give you some help, Captain," General Crook said.

"No thanks, sir. This is a private matter."

"Sure. I understand."

Pryor started to turn away, but halted as a rider came in from the south. It was a courier. The soldier dismounted, saluted, handed a single dispatch to Crook. The general stepped close to a fire, read the dispatch, and began to smile. He looked across at the Rio Kid.

"A miracle, Captain," he said. "Washington has come through with permission for the Northern Cheyennes to remain in the Black Hills—forever!"

The Rio Kid smiled, and silently thanked Senator Phil Langford.

It was over for the Army, but the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles still must ride the vengeance trail. They rode through the night without fear, yet both men knew that they were up against a pair of vicious killers. And when, long after midnight, they sighted the campfire by the river each wondered if this might not be the end of life's trail for them.

But they rode boldly, guns ready, and without trickery.

They gave Chris Burrell and Matt Rigby fair warning, more warning than those two killers had ever given their victims. The two renegades leaped from their blankets, guns in hand, and peered into the darkness beyond reach of their campfire.

They could see two horsemen as shadowy figures, and Chris Burrell called out in the Cheyenne tongue.

It was clear to the Rio Kid then that the man had been trying to join the Cheyennes, in the hope of gaining their protection against whoever was on his trail. The Rio Kid cut Burrell short.

"We're not Cheyennes, Burrell!"

BURRELL fell silent. His swarthy, angular face stiffened into a terrified mask.

"It's Pryor!" Matt Rigby yelled. "It's that Rio Kid!"

He began a savage cursing, started to shoot. Chris Burrell whirled, ran. The Rio Kid let Mireles handle Matt Rigby, and the *vaquero's* gun roared as Pryor charged forward on the willing Saber. Burrell plunged wildly through the brush toward the river's edge, but cast a fear-crazed look over his shoulder upon hearing pursuit. He tripped and fell sprawling. He rolled over and cried, like an abject beggar:

"Don't kill me, Pryor! Have mercy!"

The Rio Kid's face was in deep shadow. Burrell could not see the unrelenting look upon the countenance of the man who had hunted him for so many weary miles. Burrell mistook his silence, his stillness, for sudden compassion. A sly look of hope replaced Chris Burrell's terror, and he continued to lie there and whine for mercy.

Finally Burrell rose, held out empty hands.

"See, Pryor?" he muttered. "I mean you no harm."

Pryor was unmoved.

This was vengeance for uncounted dead. This was retribution.

"Pick up yore gun, Burrell," the Rio Kid said tonelessly. "That's all the mercy you get. Pick it up and fight for yore life."

Burrell cried, "No!" He held up

shaking hands in front of his face, as if to ward off a blow. Strange sobs came from his throat.

His knees buckled, and he slumped to the ground.

And grabbed up his fallen gun!

The Rio Kid gave him first shot, a shot that went wild because of the man's terror, then he fired—and fired again and again. Mireles came riding up as Burrell died.

"It ees done, General," he whispered.

THE RIO KID looked up sharply, but not at his companion.

He looked toward the nearby river, and there in the brush fringing the bank stood what seemed like statues. There were seven of them, seven mounted Indians. They were bathed in the pale moonlight, and the Rio Kid saw how haggard they looked and how desperate their eyes were. They were Cheyennes.

Six were young warriors, Dog Soldiers, but the one in the middle of the row was old—old and bent and tired. The old man was Little Wolf.

The old Chief held a rifle in the crook of his arm. From his mouth jutted an old corncob pipe. The Dog Soldiers were armed with rifles, bows, lances. They stared at the two white men with smoldering eyes.

"Don't move, *amigo!*" the Rio Kid whispered. He raised his voice. "Little Wolf, listen—"

The old man took the pipe from his mouth, pointed the stem in the direction of Burrell's body, and grunted:

"You kill. Good."

Abruptly he turned away with his Dog Soldiers and started fording the river. The Rio Kid called after him, saying that the soldiers would no longer hunt the Cheyennes and that the tribe was free at last. But Little Wolf went on without looking back, and it was possible that he really understood less of the white man's tongue than was believed.

Farther upstream other Indians were making the crossing—men, women, children. All were mounted, and many were burdened with their few pitiful belongings. It was a heart-wrenching sight, this flight to freedom, and it had been, Bob Pryor knew, a courageous flight seldom, if ever, matched by any people. The Cheyennes fled on, vanishing into the darkness across the river. They would not know until the coming spring that they need flee no longer.

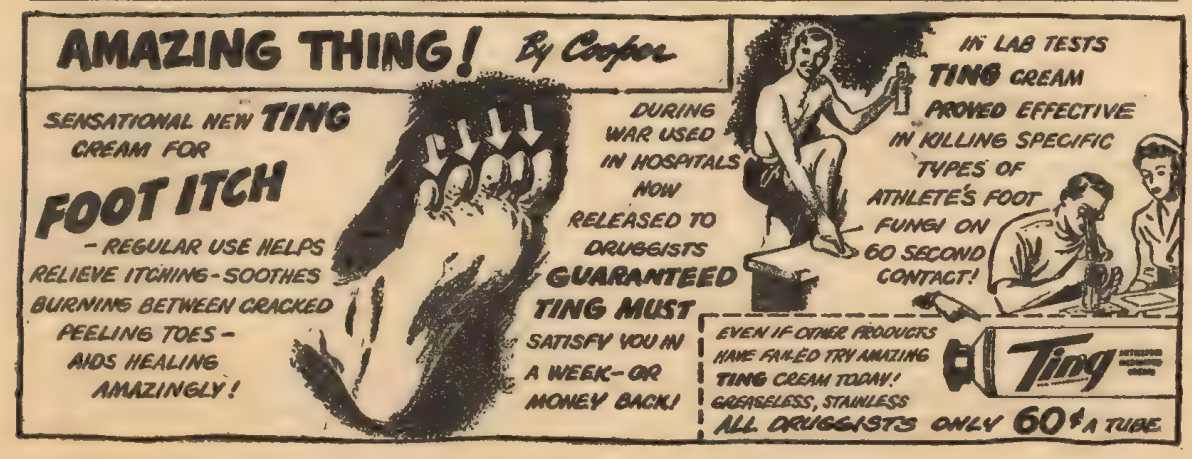
The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles turned south.

They rode through the darkness in silence, and the Black Hills were quiet and at peace. No soldiers rode with ready carbines tonight. And the vengeance trail followed so far by the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles had reached its end.

"It's good to be alive and free, eh, *amigo?*" Bob Pryor finally said softly to his his companion.

And Celestino Mireles, who was wise in his own way, replied as softly.

"Ees good, *General mio,* that some men will fight to keep us all free. *Muy bueno!*"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The black-hatted man began to fire, shooting with speed and skill

Chick Bowdrie's deadly guns deal reluctant justice to a man who isn't smart enough to go straight when he has the chance!

THE RANGER RIDES TO TOWN

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

MORNING lay sprawled in sleepy comfort in the sunlit streets of Slade. The banker's rooster, having several times informed the town that he was awake and doing, walked proudly toward the dusty street. The banker, his shirt tail hanging out, was just leaving the front door accompanied by two other men, both dusty from hard riding.

Before the bank a man in a linen duster sat astride a blood bay with a rifle across his knees and the reins of three other horses in his hands. The fourth man of the group leaned against a storefront some twenty yards away with a rifle in his hands.

The bank's door was already open and the banker and his two escorts disappeared within.

East of the town the dry wash had been bridged and the sound of a horse's hoofs crossing that bridge was always

audible within the town. Now, suddenly, that bridge thundered with the rush of a hard ridden horse and the two men in the street looked around sharply.

Back of his house, Tommy Ryan, thirteen years old and small for his age, was splitting wood. He glanced around in time to see a hammer headed roan, its sides streaked with sweat, charge into the street, its rider was erect and tall, wearing black, flat crowned hat and black chaps, and the two guns in his hands weren't there for fun.

A gun bellowed, then another, and then the black hatted man began to fire, flipping his six shooters and shooting with speed and skill. In an instant, the street was thundering with gunfire. The man in the linen duster who had fired the first shot, lay sprawled in the dust. The rifleman in front of the store was coughing out his life with his body draped around an awning post, his rifle on the boardwalk behind him.

One of the banker's escorts lay sprawled in the doorway and the man who rode the roan horse stood over him, staring into the shadowy precincts of the bank.

The sheriff pushed his way through the crowd that appeared almost from nowhere. He glanced sharply at the man in the black hat. "Hi, Bowdrie! Didn't know you was in the country!"

"Not many did." Bowdrie nodded at the dead outlaws. "I got a tip on this. It looks like I got here right on time."

"Some shootin'," a bystander suggested, "you really nailed 'em."

"Surprise," Chick Bowdrie replied, "they didn't expect anybody to come shootin'. I had the edge on 'em."

Sheriff Hadley led the way into the bank. Inside, he stopped abruptly. Two more men lay on the floor here, and one of them was the banker, He had been shot through the back of the head at close range.

Hadley's face was serious. "Too bad. Hayes was a good man. This town needed him an' more like him." He stared down at the body. "Anyway," he added, "you scored a clean sweep. You got 'em all."

"Yeah," Bowdrie agreed, "that's what it looks like." His cold black Apache eyes were inscrutable. He glanced around the bank with a swift, all registering glance, and then walked back toward the private office of the banker. It was cool and undisturbed. He stood there alone for a long minute, looking around. He was a tall young man with a lean, rider's body and broad, powerful shoulders. This room had been the seat of a man's pride, of his life's work. Now that man was dead, and for what? That some loose gunned wastrels might get a few dollars for whisky and women.

"No business today, Sheriff." Bowdrie took out the makings and began to build a smoke. "Can you fix it?"

"I reckon, if there's reason." Hadley's eyes searched Bowdrie's face. "Young Jim Cane can take over, though, if need be."

"Not today. Don't explain, just suggest the bank stay closed."

TOMMY RYAN stared wide eyed at Chick Bowdrie. He had heard much of the Ranger, but this was the first time he had ever seen him. Chick's eyes wandered up and down the street, scanning the face of the men and the buildings.

"Anything I can do?" The man was tall and well set up with blond hair and friendly eyes. "I'm Kent Friede. I was a friend of Hayes'."

"Don't reckon there's anything to do, Kent," Hadley said quietly. "Hayes never had a chance. Shot right through the head. But Bowdrie here made a cleanup. He got 'em all."

"Uh uh." Chick's black eyes lifted casually. "I got three—I didn't shoot that man inside the bank, an' he didn't shoot Hayes."

"What?" Hadley turned on him, amazed. "Then who—?"

"There was a fifth man," Chick said quietly, "one who never showed in the operation. He killed both Hayes and the outlaw inside the bank."

Friede frowned. "I don't think I follow you. How could that be?"

Bowdrie shrugged and struck a match on his chaps. "Who runs the bank now? This Jim Cane you mentioned?"

"Uh huh. If there's anything left to run. The old man was the bank, all things said. Lucky. they didn't get away with any money."

"It's my guess they did," Bowdrie said. "The fifth man got it, and I'll bet he knew where it was."

"You're implying it was an inside job?" Friede demanded. "It doesn't make it look good for Cane, then."

Chick Bowdrie shrugged. "Some things don't fit, but they will before I'm through. That unknown outlaw got away, but we'll get him."

Yet, as he walked up the street he was far from feeling as confident as he talked. He had said nothing of his reasons for believing there was a fifth man in on the robbery, and actually, there was but little evidence.

First, who had tipped him off, and why? Who had thrown a note wrapped around a stone into the light of his campfire only a few hours ago? A note that told him of the holdup and how it was to be carried out?

At first glance he had seen that the banker had been killed from close up. Also, when he entered the bank there had been a thin blue of tobacco smoke in the air of the office, and the faint smell of tobacco. None of the outlaws had been smoking, nor had the harried banker.

Nor did they have any reason for entering the private office. The huge old safe was against the back wall some distance away and it was before this safe that Hayes had been killed. A man standing in the door of the private office could have fired that shot, and all Bowdrie's man-hunting instinct told him no outlaw would have been in that position. But suppose a man had been concealed inside the bank? Where would he wait?

A small boy stood nearby in bare feet and Bowdrie glanced at the wide blue eyes and the freckled face. "Hi, Podner!" he said, smiling one of his rare smiles. "This your town?"

"Yep! I'm Tommy Ryan. My Pap sunk the first well ever dug in this county."

"Makes him rate high in my book," Chick assured him seriously, "any man who brings water to a dry county deserves credit. Lots of credit."

"You stayin' in Slade?" Tommy asked.

"Little while. I got to find a man, first." He glanced at the boy and said quietly, "That was a dirty deal, Tommy. There was another man in that. He not only shot Banker Hayes in the back, but he double crossed his own pals. I've got to find him."

The boy nodded seriously. By his own standards as well as those of the time and place in which he lived, the two crimes were among the worst of which a man could be accused.

CHICK BOWDRIE walked back to his horse and after watering the animal, he mounted and rode out of town. He seemed to feel curious eyes watching his leave taking, but he did not turn. Suspicion within the town was already centering, he knew. And centering upon Cane, the man who would inherit the banker's property.

Yet easy as that solution seemed, and Bowdrie could think of a half-dozen reasons for believing it, Chick was undecided. He rode out of town, then circled and when well out of sight, picked up the trail of the four outlaws.

They must have reached town no more than fifteen or twenty minutes before he raced down the street, both guns going. That meant they must have been camped some place not too far away, and they must have been, although not necessarily so, visited by the mysterious man who tipped them off on the robbery and was their aide.

The four had made no effort to cover their trail during the last miles of their ride. Yet suddenly their tracks merged with those of a herd of horses, and he was more than two hours in finding their trail. Now the going not only became rougher, but the trail was much less easy to follow. Yet he moved on,

searching out only after great difficulty the weavings and turnings of the riders.

At first the trail had held to dry stream beds and mesquite thickets that towered higher than a rider's head, but now the tracks led into a rocky canyon and then emerged in a still wider canyon down which a stream flowed. The sun was already past its zenith and beginning a slow decline toward the horizon. A few scattered clouds offered momentary shade, but otherwise the afternoon was still and intensely hot.

From time to time Bowdrie stopped to mop perspiration from his face, and during one of these stops his eye detected a black spot off on his right, away from the trail. He swung his horse and walked him in that direction.

It was nothing more than a bit of dark earth gouged up by the hoofs of a running horse. He swung down and examined it for some time, carefully studying both the single track and the ground in either direction. Part of it was loose gravel and left no track to be defined, but elsewhere he found three more tracks, enough for identification.

He mounted once more and drifted on. Almost an hour later, he found the ashes of a campfire and a few unburned sticks. He stirred the ashes, but found no embers, yet when he dipped his fingers into them there was still warmth, although not much.

Carefully, he divided the area off into quarters and then began a systematic and painstaking examination of the ground. Four men had eaten here, and had made coffee. They had been joined by a fifth, a man who sat flat on the ground with one leg outstretched. His spur had made a gouge in the ground and there were faint scratches on the sand alongside the upper part of the boot. He studied the whole situation carefully, then mounted and circled the camp in ever widening loops.

Suddenly, he drew up. Here, behind a clump of mesquite, a man had crouched, spying upon the outlaw camp. Bowdrie scowled and muttered irritably. The roan twitched an ear, and Chick glanced up. The horse was looking toward the mesquite with both ears pointed. Speaking softly to the horse, Chick waited.

A rider pushed through the mesquite and came toward them at a fast lope, but the man had his eyes to the ground and did not see Chick Bowdrie until he was close up. Then his head swung up and he reined in sharply. It was Kent Friede.

His mouth tightened as recognition came. "Found anything?" His eyes were searching, wary.

"Not much." Bowdrie jerked his head to the north. "They camped back yonder, an' they had a visitor."

"Ah!" Friede nodded thoughtfully. "I reckoned as much. Most likely Cane rode out here to give 'em the information."

"What makes you think it was Cane? Anybody might have done it."

"He had most to gain. Who else could gain by killing Hayes?"

BOWDRIE shrugged, sitting easy in the saddle. The two Colts rode easy on his thighs and he liked the feel of them there. Somehow he had a hunch that he wouldn't want to turn his back on this man. It was just a hunch, and a man could be mistaken. It was never wise to jump to conclusions. Evidence —that was what a man needed.

"Never met Cane," Bowdrie commented, "what's he like?"

"About twenty-five, nice appearin' fellow. He's been a cowhand, worked in a store when he first hit town, then freighted awhile."

"How's he come to be Hayes' heir? Relative?"

"About to marry his daughter, an' Hayes cottoned to him. He's been workin' with Hayes in the bank for more than a year."

Jim Cane was in the Caprock Saloon with Hadley when they walked in. He was a tall, rangy young man with dark red hair and a hard jaw looking more like a rider than a banker. He turned sharply as Chick Bowdrie entered with Friede, and Cane's gray eyes slanted from one to the other. Chick felt his

pulse lift a beat as he looked at Cane. A few years had changed him much.

"Find anything?" Hadley asked. The sheriff was a stalwart man with a leather hard face and cool, careful eyes. He would be, Bowdrie decided, a bad man to have on your tail, a good man at your side.

"Not much," Bowdrie explained, but said nothing more than that there had been a visitor. He did not mention the unseen watcher, nor what he had found around the campfire.

"All right to open the bank?" Cane demanded. There was a shade of belligerence in his voice. "I've ranchers coming in for their pay roll money."

"Will you have money to pay off?"

Cane nodded. "I've sent to Maravillas for it." He hesitated. "We lost eight thousand dollars."

"The pay roll money? Somebody must have known you would have it there."

"Everybody knew," Cane said, "we've been supplying the ranchers with their pay roll cash for a couple of years."

"Eight thousand." Bowdrie's dark eyes lifted to Cane's. "That should hurt to lose. Can you make out?"

"You mean, does it break the bank?" His voice was edged. "No, it doesn't. The bank belongs to Mary Jane now, and I won't let it break." There was hardness in his voice and cool determination.

"You should make out," Friede commented, "as long as no rumors get around. What if folks started a run on it?"

Jim Cane turned his eyes to Friede. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like to see Mary Jane broke and you'd like to see me out on my uppers."

Bowdrie watched the two men, and saw Hadley's eyes go quickly from one to the other. Out of such a quarrel might come something revealing.

"I've no trouble with either of you. If Hayes wanted to take a saddle tramp into his bank that was his right. If Mary Jane wants to marry a saddle tramp, that's hers."

Cane stiffened and his fists balled. "Why, you—"

"Easy, boys!" Hadley said quietly. "There'll be no fighting here. Kent, you watch you're tongue. I've seen men killed for less."

Friede shrugged, his face was cold and white, but it was not fear, but something else, something even more deadly. This man when cornered would be dangerous. "Don't start anything, Cane," he said sneering, "or I'll have my say. Some folks don't like wet stock."

JIM CANE stopped as if struck, and his eyes widened. Friede turned away, ugly triumph showing on his face, and walked quickly from the saloon. Cane stared after him, his tongue trembling as it touched his lips Then he, too, walked out.

Hadley stared after them, puzzled. "Now what did he mean by that?" he inquired softly. "Maybe our boy Kent Friede knows more than he lets on."

Chick Bowdrie said nothing, but behind the dark mask of his Indian like face, his mind was working swiftly. The deep, dimple like scar under his cheekbone seemed deeper now, and his face was drawn and somehow colder. Leaving Hadley in the saloon he crossed to the bank.

Here all was silent. It was not yet dark, but the sun was down and most people were at supper. Letting himself into the bank, Chick stood there alone, looking around. Only a few hours before two men had died here, and suddenly, killed by a man they trusted, but who had that man been?

For almost an hour, Chick sat in the darkening bank, and then finally, he got to his feet and walked back into the private office of the banker. For a long time there he rummaged through the papers in an old filing cabinet, then gave up and left the bank, closing it behind him.

The Hayes house was down the street and he walked that way. In answer to his knock, the door was opened by a slender dark haired girl with lovely eyes. "Oh? You're the Ranger? Will you come in?"

Bowdrie removed his hat and followed her through the ornate old parlor with its stiff collared portraits of ancestors to a spacious and comfortable living room. The table was set for three, but only one plate was in use.

Mary Jane looked up at him quickly. "I—I set Dad's place, too. I guess—well, it's habit."

"Sure. The other one's for Jim Cane?"

She nodded. "Have you seen him? I've been so worried. He's taking this awfully hard. He—he loved Dad as much as I did." Her voice was low and he caught the thickness in it and swiftly changed the subject.

"I'll finish here tomorrow and be riding on," he said abruptly. Then he glanced up at her. "Was Kent Friede sweet on you?"

"Sort of—as much as he could be on anyone. Kent's mostly concerned with himself—and then, well, he's not the sort of man a girl would want to marry. I mean—he's killed men. He's very fast with a gun, probably the fastest around here unless it's Hadley."

Chick Bowdrie's black eyes lifted to hers and there was a smile in them. "You wouldn't marry a gunfighter?"

She flushed quickly, realizing what she had said. "Well, I—I didn't mean that exactly, but—"

Chick grinned suddenly. "You're coffee's good. Even a gunfighter could enjoy it. But I know what you mean. You want to be sure when you cook supper that there's somebody to eat it, and with a gunslinger for husband you'd never be sure."

The door opened suddenly and there were steps and a quick jingle of spurs and then Jim Cane stood framed in the door. His face was white and his eyes went sharply from the girl to Bowdrie. "You here?" His voice was thick. "Why can't you let this girl alone? She's lost her father an' then you—!"

"Jim!" Mary Jane's voice was quick. "Mr. Bowdrie has been very nice. We were just talking and he was drinking coffee with me. Sit down and you can eat dinner, both of you."

"Maybe the Ranger won't be able to." His gray eyes turned to Chick's. "There's been a killing. Kent Friede was found dead just a few minutes ago."

Chick Bowdrie put down his cup. "Who found him?"

"I did." Cane was defiant. "I found him. He was in the alley back of the bank, an' if you think I killed him, you're dead wrong!"

"I didn't say." Chick got to his feet. "Thanks, Miss Hayes."

KENT FRIEDE was dead, all right. He lay on his face in the alley with a knife between his shoulder blades, a knife that had been driven home by a sure, powerful hand. His body was still warm.

A half-dozen men watched Bowdrie make his examination and get to his feet. Chick was thinking fast.

This was all wrong. Kent Friede was no man to let another get behind him without knowing it. Nor was there any cover close by. And the alley was mostly gravel and not an easy place for one man to creep up behind another. This was cold blooded murder, but one thing he knew. It had not happened here in this alley.

He withdrew the knife and studied it in the light of a lantern. Then he held it up. "Anybody recognize this? It's an old knife."

"It's—it's mine!" Tommy Ryan pushed through the crowd that had gathered, his eyes enormous in the dim light. "It's my knife. I was throwin' it this afternoon, at a mark in that old corner tree."

Bowdrie glanced in the indicated direction and nodded. Left there it would be ready to anyone's hand. He balanced the knife and his eyes squinted thoughtfully.

Kent Friede was dead—and the body had been found by Jim Cane. Only a short time before the two had almost come to blows before numerous witnesses, and Friede had made his knowing remark about wet stock. Bowdrie could hear muttering in the crowd, and the name of Cane was mentioned.

Hadley shrugged. "This don't look so good, Bowdrie. Sure don't. Folks are already mad at me for not arrestin' Jim for that bank robbery. Now this here's goin' to stir up trouble, sure as shootin'."

"Have you any evidence?" Chick asked quietly. "Or have they?"

"No," Hadley agreed reluctantly, "nobody has any that I know of. I'd never have suspected anything was wrong at the bank without you speakin' of it." He looked up. "What first give you the idea?"

"First? Tobacco smoke. Somebody was in the bank before the outlaws came. He waited in the banker's office after tipping me off as to the robbery and its time. He figured I'd stir up a gunfight on the outside and kill some or all of them an' maybe be killed myself. I think that was an item he counted on.

"Then he finished off the two inside and got away clean with the money. If I'd been killed, he probably figured nobody would ever guess the truth an' he'd have the money an' be completely in the clear."

"Looks like he is, anyway," Hadley said ruefully, hitching his guns around on his legs. "I can't figure it. This Friede, he may have known something."

"He knew a lot. A lot too much. You see, Sheriff, he knew who that other outlaw was. He knew the fifth man. Friede followed somebody out to that outlaw camp and he watched, crouched down in the mesquite while they sat there and planned."

Hadley was silent, and the two walked back to the saloon. Later, pleading weariness, Chick Bowdrie walked to the hotel. When he got inside of his ground floor room, he bundled the bedding together to resemble the body of a sleeping man and then spread his own bedroll on the floor and lay down. In a matter of minutes he was sound asleep.

The crash of the gun awakened him and Chick Bowdrie lunged for the door. The bullet had smashed into the heaped up clothing on the bed and then thudded into the wall only inches away from his skull. Darting out the door, he rushed into the alley. A light went on somewhere, and he heard angry talk. The alley was empty and still.

For a time he waited, but nothing happened. A few people came out, looked around, and then went back to bed. Bowdrie waited, then took a chance and lighted a smoke. Grimly, he studied the line of the bullet. It could have come from the corner of the livery stable, a dark spot where a man might stand for hours and not be seen.

Walking in that direction, he studied the ground. No cigarette butts, but there were tracks. Against the wall was a tiny heap of ashes. Among the ashes were some partly burned fragments of tobacco. Chick scraped them together and put them in a small paper in his shirt pocket.

Standing at the corner he saw that he was no more than fifty yards from Jim Cane's cabin. Walking along the silent back street he passed Cane's dark cabin and turned the corner. There was no sign of life around the sheriff's office and he walked behind it and back to the hotel. On the way he stopped by the tree where young Tommy Ryan had been practicing knife throwing.

MORNING dawned bright and sunny. Chick Bowdrie walked out on the street and shoved his flat brimmed black hat back on his head. He felt good, despite the fact that he knew he was standing right in the end of a shooting gallery with a killer at the other end. And that killer was both puzzled and worried.

A well laid plan had backfired. Too many things had gone wrong and now the killer did not know but what something else, something he did not know about, had also gone wrong.

If anything had, only one way out remained. To kill Chick Bowdrie. That the Ranger knew more than he was expected to know, was obvious.

That he had been marked for death while taking some of the outlaws with him, Bowdrie was well aware, and that he had lived to investigate the crime

had been one of the first things to go wrong. The first had been Friede's spying on the outlaw camp, even though the killer could not have known that until later. Friede had been killed and one mistake rectified, yet Bowdrie remained.

Chick walked slowly across the dusty street toward the restaurant. Every nerve was alert and ready for action. His hands swung easily at his sides near the walnut stocked guns whose deadly accuracy was already a frontier legend. When he got to the restaurant, Chick turned and studied the street. Then Jim Cane stepped out of an alley and started across to the restaurant. Bowdrie went inside and seated himself.

He knew his killer. He knew just exactly who the outlaw was and what he had done. Moreover, he knew the man was worried. The flaw was that he had no concrete evidence. Several intangible clues, small things, things that weighed heavily with him but which would scarcely do to offer to a jury as evidence with a man's life at stake.

Jim Cane pushed open the door and strode inside. His swift glance caught Bowdrie's and he was across the floor in three steps. "How about the bank?" he demanded. "Do I open it today? Hadley says it's okay."

"Want a cup of coffee?" Bowdrie asked mildly. "Sure, open it up. There's nothing there, anyway. Open it up, and good luck to you. Also," he added, "you might do this for me." He whispered.

Cane stared at him, then wheeled and walked from the cafe. Chick Bowdrie put another spoon of sugar in his coffee and smiled at nothing.

Young Tommy Ryan came to the door and peered in, then he crossed to the table. "Mr. Bowdrie," he said, "I got somethin' to tell you. I—I seen who took my knife."

Bowdrie glanced at him sharply, then said, "Who have you told besides me?"

"Nobody, on'y Pa, he said—"

"Tell me later," Chick said. "Why don't you sit over at that table and drink some milk an' eat a piece of apple pie? On me?"

Sheriff Hadley came in. He was a strapping big man and he walked swiftly, his gray hat pulled down, the old fashioned mule ear straps flapping against the sides of his boots.

He dropped into a chair opposite the Ranger. "Bowdrie," he said, "I figured to talk to you first. I got to make an arrest. It ain't no secret now who done all this. I'm goin' to arrest the thief an' killer."

"Why not leave it to me?" Bowdrie asked. His forearms rested on the table and his black eyes met those of the sheriff across the table "I've known almost from the start who he was. Things began to tie up when I first saw those bodies lying on the floor in the bank. That dead outlaw—that was Nevada Pierce."

"Pierce?" Hadley stared at him. "You sure o' that?"

"Uh, huh," Bowdrie sipped his coffee, "I sent him to prison once. Got his description in the Ranger's Bible, anyway. Lots of descriptions there, Hadley."

Their eyes clung. "You mean—You got Jim Cane's description, too?"

"Sure. I spotted him right off, Hadley. Jim used to run wet horses over the Rio Grande from Mexico, and probably some the other way. That was four, five years ago."

"You knowed he was a horse thief and didn't arrest him?"

CHUCK said, "That's right, Hadley. You see, I figure it like this. We live in lawless times. This country has been mighty lawless for a long time. Lots of hombres made their first stake by brandin' loose unbranded stock. It wasn't theirs but nobody could prove a claim to it. Afterward, other boys came along just a little late, so to even things up, they switched brands.

"Now maybe that's stealin', Hadley, but it's hard to figure the justice of it. Later, even now in fact, it is stealin'. For first stock is all gone an' the men who have branded stock have been carin' for it an' workin' for it. But it hasn't been always easy to see who's a crook an' who isn't. Later, when the

whole country has law the line will be easier to draw. Now it ain't.

"So you know what I do? I don't judge a man by his record. Any man might rustle a few head of stock. That gives us cause to watch him, but suppose he goes straight after that? You think we should persecute him? Not me."

"You call killin' an' robbin' banks goin' straight?" Hadley demanded irritably.

"No, I sure don't. Not one bit. If Cane had robbed that bank or killed anybody, I'd arrest him. Only, he didn't."

Sheriff Hadley stared at Chick Bowdrie and slowly his eyes began to narrow and his lips to tighten. Across the table their glances clung.

"That Ranger's Bible, Sheriff, has a lot of descriptions. It had descriptions of the gang who used to run with Pierce. You know, one thing always puzzled Pierce, an' that was how the Rangers were smart enough to outguess him. What he didn't know was that we were tipped off by one of his own outfit!"

Hadley's big hands rested on the table, but now he pushed his chair back carefully. "You got this killer spotted, Ranger?" he asked.

"Uh huh. I sure have. Like Cane, he's got a record, but at first I wasn't sure. Not right at first. Maybe I was wrong an' prejudiced because of his record. Maybe it was Kent Friede or Cane. So I waited."

Chick Bowdrie lifted his coffee cup and looked over it at Sheriff Hadley. "You shouldn't have done it, Sheriff. You had a nice job here. People respected you. You could have gone straight."

"Straight?" Hadley sneered, but he kept his voice low. "What do you mean? With eight thousand dollars waitin' to be picked up easy as pie? An' Jim Cane to lay it on?" His voice deepened and grew ugly. "An' I'd have made it if it hadn't been for you!"

Chick Bowdrie was smiling. "You tipped the Rangers off the first time, didn't you? We always wondered where the money got to in that Pierce hold up, an' so did Pierce. Now we know. You got it. An' you tried it again right here. You're under arrest, Hadley."

Hadley backed up, his face ugly. His big hands hovered over his guns. "You make a move, Ranger, an' you die! Hear me?"

"Sure." Bowdrie still held his coffee up. "Sure, I hear."

Hadley sprang back through the door and darted across the street. Coolly, Chick Bowdrie got up and tossed a couple of silver dollars on the table. "For the kid's grub, too." He turned. "Thanks, Tommy, it was Hadley you saw, wasn't it?"

"Uh huh." Tommy stared wide eyed. "You lettin' him get away?"

"No, Tommy. Only I didn't want any shooting in here. He won't get far. You see, I planned it something like this. There ain't a horse on the street, Tommy, nor in the stable. Hadley isn't goin' very far this time."

SLOWLY, he walked to the door. Outside the street was empty and still, yet behind all the windows there would be men, behind the doors, too. They would be watching. Hadley was tearing into his hiding place to get the eight thousand dollars. Soon he would find he had no horse in his stable so he would rush to the street to grab the first one he saw.

Bowdrie stepped out on the porch. His mouth felt dry and he rubbed his hands on his shirt front, then dropped them to his side. Under the brim of the black hat he stared across the dusty street toward the alley.

Hadley charged from the alleyway, a heavy sack in his hand. He glanced swiftly, left and right, aghast when he saw no horses.

Chick Bowdrie walked slowly down the steps and his boots sounded loud in the empty street. "Hadley, you needn't look. There ain't a horse in a quarter of a mile."

Hadley stared, and even at the distance between them Bowdrie could see how venomous were his eyes. "You! You done this!"

"Sure, Hadley. I did it. I wanted you to make a break for it, Hadley, because I didn't have enough proof. Only that there were no cigarette butts in the bank, and you smoke a pipe. And Pierce's old partner was a knife thrower, an' the knife that killed Friede had to be thrown."

As he spoke, he walked nearer, little puffs of dust rising from his boot toes. "We never had a full description of you, Hadley. You could have gone straight an' nobody the wiser. But you tied it all up, you yourself."

Hadley's right hand slapped leather and his gun lifted. Flame stabbed from Bowdrie's gun and the ex-sheriff spun half way around, blood staining his sun faded red shirt. He dropped the bank loot then, and firing one gun, clawed for the other. Chick Bowdrie stepped forward, standing very straight, his feet wide apart. His guns hammered, and the false fronted buildings rocketed the sound back and forth across the street as the tall, sombre young man in the flat brimmed black hat smashed the killer into the dust.

Hadley went back, cursing viciously and obscenely. Bowdrie took a step forward, his gun ready, holding his fire.

Hadley stared up at him, his eyes still alive, his body shattered and bloody. "A dirty Ranger!" he snarled. "It had to be a Ranger!"

"Yeah," Chick said quietly, "but you got it good. Right in the front. Not in the back like Hayes or Pierce."

Hadley clawed for a gun again, but while his fingers grasped the butt, they could not close, they could not tighten. Slowly, the outlaw's muscles relaxed and he lay still at last, in the dust, the sack of loot beside him.

Men rushed from the stores and the Bank. Jim Cane was first. Bowdrie straightened up and handed him the sack. The red headed man's eyes were grateful. "Thanks," he said, "thanks for everything. I moved the horses like you said."

Cane stared at the dead man, then shook his head. "What made you guess? However did you know?"

Bowdrie shrugged, thumbing shells into his guns. Then he told Cane what he had told Hadley, adding. "It was all of those things together, along with those mule ear straps on his boots. The man Friede spied on talkin' to the outlaws had mule ear straps. They left marks in the sand.

"Friede must have braced Hadley for some of the money. Anyway, Hadley knew he knew, so he murdered him. All along he figured on you being the goat. He even rode one of your horses out to the outlaw hideout. Also, Hadley said he didn't know I was in the country, and I happen to know that the Ranger office informed him I was comin' through, so he was the only one could have thrown that note to warn me of the raid."

"You'd think he would have been smart enough to go straight," someone in the crowd commented.

"Yeah," Chick Bowdrie glanced up at Jim Cane and smiled, "the smart one's do go straight."

"Say," Cane suggested, "you got time for some eggs? Mary Jane said if I saw you, to bring you by. An' she makes the best griddle cakes in Texas!"

Bowdrie shoved his hat back on his head and grinned suddenly. His whole face seemed to light up when he smiled. "You know, you've touched my weak spot. I always did like to eat. Let's go!"

COMING NEXT ISSUE

WHILE THE GALLOWS WAIT

A Swift-Moving Complete Action Novelet by LARRY A. HARRIS

Rand's fist smashed against Marco's jaw, sending him reeling back

TEXAS GOLD

CHAPTER I

Range Fire Feuding

ALAMO RAND roused out of his reverie and sniffed the breeze, like a hound on a scent. What he smelled made him rein in the flea-bitten dun he was riding. The mysterious sense that had guided him in so many narrow escapes, whispered warningly within him. Alamo knew—as well as he knew that he was sitting there in his old Brazos saddle in the bright west Texas sunlight—that any man packing what he happened to have in his saddle-bags, should get out of there in a hurry.

Alamo Rand sniffed again, then shook his dust-caked Stetson in a stubborn negative and kneed the dun off the trail.

"Old Churn-head," he mused to the crowbait dun, "a hombre who hunts for trouble most generally finds it. But back where I come from, way down on the Line, a full-grown man never fails to lend a hand when he smells smoke on the wind."

The dun hadn't taken ten steps before the keenness of the rider's sense of smell was verified. Over the top of a mesquite-fringed ridge, less than a quarter of a mile to the north, drifted thin streamers of smoke. It was just the color of Alamo Rand's eyes, a smoky blue-gray, like the haze that hangs over the plains of south Texas.

But that isn't what Alamo was thinking about. He was thinking how to get

Alamo Rand Wages His Own Private War Against

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a novelet by
MOJAVE LLOYD

to the top of that ridge. If somebody didn't stop that fire in a hurry, with the range like tinder under the broiling sun, it might sweep for miles over the grasslands, destroying whole ranches in its path.

"Get along, Dynamite," Rand urged the lifeless dun. "See if you can drag your fire-spittin' carcass up this arroyo, so I can get a look from that ridge top."

But Alamo Rand, late of the Medina River country, and bent upon a mission that brooked no interference, was destined never to help fight that particular fire. The dun slithered down into the arroyo, stumbled and came up as lame as a trail herd waif.

"Hold everything, firewater," exclaimed Alamo, dropping from the saddle. And for all his two hundred pounds of bone and sinew, he dropped so lightly his boot heels scarcely made marks in the sand.

A sharp stone was wedged in between

the Powerful Cienega Band of Grim Outlaws!

shoe and frog on the dun's off forefoot. Rand gently tried to dig it out with calloused fingers, then with the blade of his pocket knife. But it was stuck fast. The pony had come down hard. The stone was wedged deep into the frog.

"Now, now, bronc," Alamo told the flinching dun. "I'm not a-goin' to hurt you. Stand still. I'll have to pull off this shoe, free the stone, then tack the shoe on again." The dun turned his head and regarded Rand with patient eyes. Then, as if deciding the man was one a horse could trust, he dozed.

QUICKLY Alamo got a short-handled hammer out of a saddle-bag and worked away. His wind-whipped old sombrero cuffed to the back of his curly head, with the pony's foot tucked between his knees, he worked and sweated and swore. As he worked, he kept on sniffing. Even as a boy, his sense of smell had been so keen that in the dark he could tell the identities of horses he was familiar with. He used his nose like an animal, rather than like a man. What puzzled him now was that the acrid odor of smoke was lessening.

Then his ears went into action. His ears were just as quick as his nose. He dropped the dun's foot as though it had suddenly become a red-hot coal. His sinewy right hand dropped to the worn butt of a big single-action Colt holstered against his thigh.

But when he saw what came plunging over the rim of the arroyo, he decided that wasn't the play to make—not right away, anyhow. He shifted his hand and used it to wipe the dust and sweat out of his narrowed eyes.

Seven men swarmed down into the arroyo and surrounded him. Their eyes were angry little red orbs in sweaty, smoke-grimed faces. Burned patches decorated their torn clothing. Beards, eyebrows, and dispositions were all well singed.

A grizzled old man with jaws like a door hinge, booted his huge black gelding up close beside Rand and peered down at him with steel-hard eyes. He shot a glance at the dun's hip, then smiled tightly, grimly. It was a smile that wasn't pleasant to look at. Hate flamed in his shrewd old eyes, but he fought hard to control himself.

"Fork that rack-of-bones, feller," he snapped, "and come along to Cienega. Freeze onto his hardware, boys. Reckon this will be proof enough, even for Lew Radebaugh."

While ready hands were lifting Alamo's six-gun and jerking his carbine from the saddle boot, the lank, hard-faced rider next to the grizzled leader jumped his roan up.

"Look at that!" he yelped, pointing at the dun's brand. At the same instant he cut the lean brute cruelly across the rump with the loaded butt of his quirt.

It took quick eyes to catch what happened after that.

Alamo's left hand froze like a vise on the lanky rider's gun-belt. The man left the saddle as though he had grabbed a tail hold on a comet. Working like a driver on a locomotive, Rand's knotted right fist collided with the man's square jaw three times while he was in the air. Then the lanky one was hurled end-over-end, like a sack of grain. He came to rest, finally, wedged in a sumac bush, after knocking a third rider from the saddle on the way.

The lanky one was tough. He came out of that sumac spitting like a she cougar with kittens. His hand flew to his holster. But he and his six-gun had gone in different directions. The grizzled leader stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"Served you right, Slats," swore the old man, "even if you are my ramrod. This salty son is goin' to town to be dealt with according to law."

He swung on Rand. Something of admiration showed in his hard eyes as he gazed at the calm cowboy. "You move right fast, for a range burner," he said.

"Yeah," drawled Alamo, with a slow grin. "I was brought up that way. My old dad always told me, if something is to be done, do it before the other fellow thinks of it. He likewise told me, horses have feelings and shouldn't be

abused. And besides which, down where I came from, strangers ain't molested and called range burners without being told what it is all about. That's not considered decent." He looked the old man straight in the eye. "We are honest folks, there."

"Just where at might that be?" inquired the tall oldster dryly.

"That," drawled the big cowboy, "just happens to be none of your business!"

"Aw, boss," cut in the lanky one. "You aren't fixin' to tote this coyote clear to Cienega for that Radebaugh to let get away from him? Besides, the marshal's out of town. Another ten minutes' start and the fire this coyote set would have wiped out the Hashknife buildings and corrals slicker than slippery elm bark. Leave us boys give him a ride over the ridge at the end of a hemp necktie."

The old man ignored his ramrod. "Harken to me, feller," he snapped at Rand. "Just as if you didn't know it all already, I'll recite the whole set-up."

WEARILY, the Hashknife crew eased their tired bodies in their saddles, watching like hawks. Ponies went hipshot. Far overhead, a stiff-winged buzzard wheeled.

"Me," continued the old man, "I'm Steve Calhoun, owner of the Hashknife outfit. We been at war, since before Hector was a pup, with that polecat Luke Marco of the Cripple M over water holes. *'Sta bueno!"*

He swung his massive head and looked at the girl who rode up, a tawny-haired girl wearing a dove-colored Stetson perched rakishly over one ear.

"Judy," said the old cattleman severely, but with a softness in his keen old eyes, "seems like I recollect tellin' you to stay to home."

No one noticed that the name "Judy" affected Rand like the sting of a yellow-jacket.

Miss Judith's rounded chin rose a fraction of an inch. Alamo felt a prickly sensation along his spine and up into the roots of his hair. He looked at the little chin, at teeth like white grains of corn, at soft brown eyes that made him dizzy. He doffed his battered old sombrero in a graceful sweep. A half-shy grin tempered the taut lines of his weathered face.

The girl's eyes laughed in return. Then, as if realizing too late what she had so impulsively revealed, she dropped her eyes to the saddle-horn. A warm flush spread slowly up the olive-hued column of her neck.

"Redwing needed a breather," she pouted, patting the neck of the sleek red mare she was riding.

Old Steve Calhoun didn't see what had passed. His mind was focused on the narrowly escaped destruction of the vast Hashknife spread, the work of his lifetime, of that of his father before him. It was a heritage to be passed on intact to the slender girl on the red mare.

His eyes jerked back to where Alamo Rand stood negligently with one elbow hooked over the saddlehorn. Without appearing to, the big cowboy was shielding a saddle-bag.

"Like I say," went on Calhoun. "Luke Marco's been making his brag that it's showdown, lettin' it be known he's hired on a crew of curly wolves. Reckon you're one of them, eh?"

"What sowed that idea in your head?" inquired Alamo evenly.

He saw with a chill that, at the accusation, the girl's face lost all its friendliness. To her eyes, came something of the old man's piercing expression.

"First off," snorted old Calhoun, "you're forkin' a cayuse wearin' Marco's Cripple M iron. You circled around the end of that hogback over yonder, right from where the fire started. Then, from the ridge top, one of my crew saw you try to make a getaway through this coulee. The fire bein' put out, we come rushin' after you and find you bogged down here with a stone in your crowbait's hoof."

The old man looked around. Growls of agreement came from the tense men.

"You said a-plenty," drawled Rand disgustedly, "all wrong. I took this

arroyo to get to the top of the ridge to see where the smoke was comin' from. I was headin' *toward* the fire, not *away* from it. As for straddlin' a Cripple M bronc, I *bought* this rack-of-bones. My own mount caved in, a big gray geldin'.

"Bein' in strange country, I stopped at the first spread I came to, which happened to be the Cripple M. I turned Grayleg out in Marco's fenced pasture, to be picked up on my way back. And findin' Marco the breed of gent who won't give a hombre the lend of a horse, I made a deal for this fire-spittin' dun. You cravin' any more information?"

"You got a bill of sale from Marco?" snapped Calhoun.

Rand thought a minute. "That's a fair question," he admitted good-naturedly. "I'm dry behind the ears."

He leisurely lifted the flap of the saddle-bag he'd been shielding, as if to produce the bill of sale. No one noticed that the end of his little finger dug the dun sharply in the ribs.

The brute took two or three steps. "Stand hitched, Dynamite!" commanded Rand irritably.

The move had been just enough to place all the men in the group at Alamo's back. Rand fumbled in the bag for a minute, then spun like a top.

The mate to his other bone-heeled single-action jutted in his fist. His eyes were narrowed to smoky slits. A muscle below his left eye pulsated warningly.

AMONG the riders, breath hissed sharply between set teeth.

"Listen *amigos*," said Alamo bluntly, with deadliness in his flat voice. "I'm a peaceable grubliner, but you got me plumb riled. I have took all the hoorawin' I aim to take." He paused and watched the effect of his words sinking in.

"You, there, with the wart on your ugly snozzle"—indicating, with a wave of his six-shooter, the rider who was holding his other gun—"come over here!"

"Wart-nose" stepped his mount over beside the dun. "Hand me the short gun, butt foremost, then put the Winchester back where you found it."

The puncher snarled, but did as he was told. Then he rejoined his companions.

"That ridge top is out of rifle range," concluded Rand. "Let's see how fast the whole caboodle of you can top it."

While his venomous pistol muzzle swayed like a deadly serpent's head, he darted a glance at the spellbound girl. "Since you're one of the Calhoun tribe, miss, that includes you. Get!"

Judy gasped. Old Steve Calhoun's face turned as red as a turkey gobbler's. A curse caught in his throat. He spun his big black around, and he was trembling with rage.

"This won't end here," he spat. "Come on, boys. You too, Judy." He charged away with his crew on his heels.

Judy Calhoun sat her mare and glared at the big Texan. Her full red lips quivered. Never, in all her eighteen years, had she been spoken to like that. She was speechless. The grin that seemed to come so readily, spread over Rand's grim features, as he watched her discomfort.

"Judy is a right pretty name," he drawled. "Mine's Alamo."

The girl started to speak, but she only sputtered and bit into the curve of her lower lip. Color flamed high on her smooth cheeks, outrage in her brown eyes.

With a flick of the reins she was gone from the arroyo.

Alamo's grin broadened as he watched the straight little figure soar up the slope of the ridge. She topped out on the heels of the horsemen and disappeared without looking back. A misty light swam in Rand's blue eyes. Then the grin left his face. He shook his head abruptly.

"Uh-uh!" he lamented. "Too many bees around that blossom. I gave old Hack my word I would find a gal named Judy, but not a Judy *Calhoun*."

He tacked two more nails in the dun's shoe, climbed lazily into the saddle and shuffled away on the trail he'd been following in the first place, the trail to Cienega.

"Dynamite," he remarked above the creak of saddle leather, "buzzards are queer birds. My grandma used to say they know what is comin'. That bare-neck, sailin' up there in the sky, hasn't given up hope yet!"

CHAPTER II

Death for a Buzzard

WHILE Alamo Rand racked over the trail toward Cienega, under a blistering sun he sang softly to himself.

Roll along, little dogies; roll along, little dogies!
Your misfortunes are none of my own,
Roll along, little dogies; roll along, little dogies!
For old Wyoming will be your new home.

But his mind wasn't on the old song he'd sung so often while eating the dust of a trail herd. He was absent-mindedly going over all the angles of the jackpot he was in.

"A Texan can't back water on a promise to a dyin' man," he muttered. "Nope, not even if all the curly wolves in this whole Cienega bailiwick goes on the prod."

His candid eyes lifted above the dusty sagebrush and scrub mesquite he was winding through. They looked to where the trail disappeared in a narrow cut between outcroppings of rock on a ride top. Between him and the cut, but far off to the right, he glimpsed three riders fading into an *ocotillo* thicket.

"Dynamite," he reflected, "if any of the jaspers we had that run-in with aim to head us off and do a bit of bush-whackin', that cut will just about be the spot."

He slid his carbine from the boot, rested the butt against the inside of his right thigh and let the barrel ride in the crook of his left elbow. From then on, his smoky eyes swept the narrow pass ahead. But his thoughts roved. A picture took form in his brooding memory. . . .

An old man lay sprawled on the floor in the sawdust of a tough dive away in La Saba, down on the Line. Alamo, drifting through the south country, happened in for a drink. A total stranger in the place, he ignored the stabbing of hostile eyes, crossed lazily to where the old man lay and turned him over on his back.

The old fellow had been shot down. Blood was welling from a bullet hole in his chest. Anyone could see he hadn't long to live. His sad brown eyes looked up appealingly at Alamo.

Something that couldn't be put into words passed between the two men as though both instinctively recognized in one another a kindred spirit of wilderness and the high dark trails.

The grizzled old veteran of the plains looked up at the broad-shouldered cowboy whose muscular brown hands were so gentle. What he saw in the quiet gray-blue eyes gave the dying man confidence to say what he had to say.

"Son," gasped the old man weakly, pointing with a palsied hand, "*he* did it! That yellow tin-horn standin' there with a smokin' stingy-gun in his lily-white hand. He did it! Pulled a sneak-draw on me before I even had a chance to go for my forty-four, the pole-cat!"

Alamo lifted eyes, that had gone smoky as sin, to the face of the man pointed out. The fellow was tall and thin, with features like a vulture. Eyes like the unwinking orbs of a rattlesnake glittered in his pasty face.

A typical border tin-horn, thought Alamo. But with something lethal about him, something dangerous. Just the breed to prey upon a ragged trail-worn old saddle-tramp. Hot anger burned through Rand's veins.

"I won three thousand from him in the stud game," went on the dying man. "He claimed I ran a whizzer, and he plugged me. He's a lyin' murderin' skunk. There he stands, with my fair won *dinero* in one hand and a smokin' stingy-gun in the other." The old man sank back exhausted.

Alamo looked around again. The gambler had slipped his hideout gun back in his shoulder holster. His left hand held a buckskin sack of gold.

Alamo let his gaze stray over the circle of hostile faces surrounding him. A hard lot, he thought, floating scum of the Border, callous, cold, feasting their hard eyes on bloodshed, with no emotion on their taut features. Alamo's decision was made.

He straightened slowly to his full, tall height. His long back straightened like a whipstock. His great flat shoulders leveled. Then he went slack in a loose half-crouch every muscle loose and flowing. His square jaws clicked. In the quiet gray eyes stole an expression as cold as rimrock snow.

"I take up for the old gent!" he announced quietly. . . .

The dun stumbled, bringing Alamo back to the present. The cut in the ridge was close ahead now. He searched it with his eyes. Nothing showed.

His thoughts reverted to the scene in faraway La Saba.

He recalled how the breath had slipped between the watchers' teeth with a dry hissing sound. The bartender dropped a glass he was polishing. Over in the far corner, on the dance floor, the hysterical giggle of a percentage girl tinkled like falling icicles.

ALAMO shot a glance toward the girl in the cornflower dress. The tin-horn, being smart, saw his chance. He couldn't know that the big stranger was far smarter—that the shifting of his smoky glance to the girl was a deliberate invitation to the gambler, and lasted but the merest fraction of an instant. In that instant the drab room rocked with the roll of gun thunder.

Alamo staggered. But it was a planned stagger. The gambler staggered too, but he couldn't help it, and only partially righted himself. He stood there for a moment, swaying slightly on the high heels of his bench made boots. Unbelief clouded his glazing eyes. His stingy-gun slipped to the sawdust with a dull *plop*. He toppled stiff-ankled on his face. The bag of gold fell at Alamo's feet.

Rand's eyes flashed around the circle of hovering faces. "Any gent taking up for the deceased?" he inquired. A stony silence answered him.

A cat-eyed gunhawk, standing on the edge of the circle, glanced at the bag on the floor, at the dead gambler who was his crony. Stonily, he watched Rand's impassive face. His hand inched toward his holster. Alamo noticed that the fellow bore a peculiar leaf-shaped scar on his right cheek, and made a note to remember it.

"You, Scarface," he remarked, nodding at the gunhawk, "just drop your hardware and step over to the bar while I tote the oldster out. Careful now!"

When the killer had done as he was told, Alamo picked up the buckskin bag. He lifted the old man gently over his shoulder as easily as if he'd been a *serape*.

"Any snout that pokes itself outside before I'm clear of town," he warned, as he backed out through the batwings, "gets itself shot off."

Roll along, little dogies; roll along, little dogies!
For old Wyomin' will be your new home.

Rand's mind shuttled back to the present again. The narrow cut he had to ride through to reach Cienega was only a few hundred yards ahead. He eyed it speculatively, stroked the carbine with a calloused thumb, swayed easily on.

The oldster had died soon after he was carried out of town. Alamo had buried him on the bank of a cottonwood-shaded creek where the old drifter had been camping.

With his dying breath, the old man told Alamo he had a daughter, Judith, in the Cienega country. If Alamo would promise to find Judith and give her the three thousand he had won, together with five thousand in gold nuggets he turned over, her father would die in peace.

Alamo had nodded agreement. And before the old man could give him another word of information, death had

sealed his lips forever. . . .

Rand rode into the cut, every faculty alert. Not a cranny in the sheer rock walls escaped his eye. But whether those were not Hashknife riders he had seen, or they had decided upon some other spot, no one molested him. He knew, though, that they would make their play. It had to come. But that wasn't all that was coming!

When he rode out of the cut, he saw below him, sprawled in a sun-scorched basin, the town of Cienega. He shook the dun into a shuffle.

"But how in the name of pickled polecats," he complained, "am I goin' to find Judith Spengler?" He amused himself rolling the name on the tip of his tongue.

"I have seen cowpunchers pursuin' considerable things," he told the dun disgustedly, "includin' everything from pink-shirted elephants to steers with rattlesnakes for horns. But doggone if I ain't the craziest calf nurse of the lot!"

It was dusk when he rode into Cienega and surveyed the unsavory town from beneath the low-pulled brim of his dusty sombrero. In the evening haze the squalid 'dobe buildings took on a softened look, but there was nothing soft about that town's reputation.

Lights were beginning to show dimly behind the red-curtained windows of homes. A tinny piano was yammering somewhere. Babies were squawling, dogs shaking the dust from their coats and starting on their evening prowl.

Alamo kneed his bronc up in front of the Mossyhorn Bar, tossed the reins over the hitch-rail and slid to the ground. His knowing eyes swept over half a dozen men seated on the veranda who studied his tall figure speculatively. Not ten feet away, he spotted a big raw-boned Alamoose gelding, wearing the Crippled M iron. Hipshot beside the gelding, stood two more ponies with the same brand. Alamo shrugged, shook his holster to loosen the gun and strolled inside.

Things were dull. The evening hadn't commenced to liven up. Four bleary cowhands were listlessly playing black-jack. A swamper was dragging a mop along the front of the bar that ran the entire right hand length of the room. Over on the opposite side, beyond a cluster of poker tables with green baize tops, a painted girl in a red silk dress was idly strumming the stained keys of a battered piano. Then Alamo spotted the three who had ridden the Cripple M horses.

THEY were Luke Marco himself, Bronco Yates, his *segundo*, and the gunhawk with the leaf-shaped scar whom Alamo had last seen far away in La Saba.

So-o-o-o! thought Alamo. Dad's only boy is in a tight now, sure 'nough. That scarfaced hyena has somehow hooked up with Marco and offered him a split on what is in my saddle-bags. Things are shapin' up for a storm.

The three were standing by themselves, near the far end of the bar, talking in low tones. When they caught sight of Alamo Rand they stopped talking for a moment, then exchanged glances and resumed their conversation.

Ignoring the three as if he hadn't seen them, Rand moved up to the bar. He cuffed his hat to the back of his head and smeared some of the dust and sweat off his face with the back of his hand.

"Snake-poison," he told the glassy-eyed bartender, "out of your Christmas barrel," and made a mental note that the fellow was old enough to have been in Cienega since the town was born. "Have one yourself. Twenty-one years ago today, my dad celebrated the birth of an heir."

"Never touch it," the bartender declined, sliding bottle and glass along the bar and throwing the big rider a quizzical glance. "It ain't fit to drink. That's how come I sell it."

Alamo laughed louder than was necessary, then dropped his voice. Brief glances in the mirror told him that the three men had separated. Bronco Yates, a runty little bow-legged jasper, strolled outside. Luke Marco was drifting carelessly among the tables. Scarface was still at the bar.

"Spengler told me you were a funny cuss," said Alamo, grinning at the bartender. In truth, Spengler hadn't mentioned the bartender, but it was as good a lead as any. "Old Hack Spengler," he added. "Old codger, who used to knock round these parts. You recollect Spengler, I reckon?"

The bartender's face was as animated as a boulder. "You got me wrong, cowboy," he said. "That's a new name to me."

"If it's somebody to make medicine you're lookin' for," he went on, "you might try up the street at the sawbone's office. Old Doc Battle's been around here so long even the rattlesnakes call him by name. You saw that cottonwood standing at the end of the veranda, the one that's almost eighteen feet thick through the stump? Well, old doc planted that tree himself on his golden wedding day."

Alamo dumped the drink down his parched throat and licked his lips to stop the burning. *"Mil gracias,"* he said. "I'll mosey out and look at that tree."

As he turned, Scarface stepped squarely in front of him. Rand acted surprised. But he couldn't have been. His left hand, which Scarface paid no attention to, was inside his shirt. Scarface found something small and round and hard jabbed into his ribs. "Lookin' for me?" inquired Alamo affably.

The killer's eyes were vicious. But he was so surprised he could only stutter. His own hand had been curled around the butt of his six-gun. It dropped limply to his side. Alamo stepped back, shot a glance at the door and at Luke Marco. Death was coming from both directions.

Rand's right hand swooped down, then came up, like a rattler striking. Two shots rolled like one. Luke Marco's hat went soaring over the piano. Bronco Yates got a shattered batwing slat across his eyes and fell backwards.

Scarface's eyes were fixed on the blunt object inside Alamo's shirt. Alamo grinned and brought it into view. It was the rigid forefinger of his left hand. "You ought to remember, Scarface," he advised, "all ain't gold that glitters."

He sprang without even seeming to set himself. Before anyone could wink he had his broad back to the wall. His gun muzzle waved like a snake's head.

Bronco Yates burst back in through the wreckage of the batwings, firing blindly. Luke Marco was leveling on the South Texan. The four cowboys playing blackjack hurled their table aside and bolted. The table struck Marco's arm as his pistol exploded. Alamo swayed, stumbled to one knee, then caught his feet again. Yates howled and came on.

A red veil was falling over Alamo's eyes. He shook his curly head stubbornly. But the veil thickened. Something was wrong with his breathing. He could hear a low rumbling sound, like the thunder of stampeding cattle he had so often heard. It was rushing closer and closer. He was weaving on his feet, like a poplar in a gale. Scarface's gun roared almost in his face. Alamo crashed into the sawdust.

Thoughts ran through his mind like streamers of fire. This was the end of the long hard years. Marco and his gunmen would pour some more lead into him, then ride away with the dun. No one would lift a finger. The dun was wearing Marco's own Cripple M iron. Judy Spengler would never learn of the death of her father—never would get her gold.

A bottle hurled by the bartender splintered on Alamo's head. All went black.

CHAPTER III

Snakes in the Dark

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly to Alamo Rand. He felt warm waves flowing through his aching body. His brain throbbed agonizingly. And he could smell the sickeningly sweet odor of chloroform. Then, he heard a sharp clicking sound, as if somebody was rubbing knives to-

gether. Wary from the habits of a dangerous life, he cautiously opened one eye. Nothing showed. Then he realized that that eye was covered by a bandage swathing his head. He opened the other eye.

He was lying on a cot in a dimly lighted room. A thin slice of moon, crisscrossed by a cobweb in a window, told him it must be about midnight. He twisted his head to have a look at his surroundings.

Over in the far corner, a little man in a red plush vest sat humped over a desk. He was busily polishing surgical instruments by the light of a smoking lamp set in a tin wall bracket. His wizened little old face—with puckered eyes and a dead cigar stub protruding between his bristly mustache and sharp pointed beard—made him look like a busy little gnome. Occasionally an amused chuckle filtered through his teeth.

This will be, thought Alamo, the famous Doc Battle of the cottonwood tree.

Nervous boot heels thudded across the veranda. The door burst open and was quickly shut. From where he lay, Alamo couldn't see who had entered. The little old surgeon appeared so absorbed in polishing his forceps that he hadn't seemed to notice the entry of anybody. But he had. He spoke without looking up.

"Surgical instruments," he remarked, as if to himself, "are a lot like women. If not properly taken care of, they quickly tarnish and go to seed."

The clicking of heels and silvery jingle of spurs brought Judy Calhoun over beside the doctor's desk, where Alamo could see her flushed and anxious face. He peered through the merest slit between his eyelids.

"Doctor Battle!" Judy cried. "Come quick! Dad's been gunned, out on the Hashknife. He's bleeding to death!"

The girl sobbed and collapsed into a chair. With movements so fast they could hardly be followed, the old doctor plucked the stopper from a blue bottle, waved it before her face and bathed her pale forehead with a moistened cloth.

"Tut—tut!" he scolded. "If old Steve and a bullet tangled, it's the bullet will get the worst of it. You hush up, now, before I spank you. I didn't bring you into this world of sin and bedevilment and watch over you ever since, just to see you faint."

He busied himself packing his kit. The girl straightened her wind-tousled hair with a tiny gloved hand, as if unconscious of what she was doing. When she spoke again, her voice had gone tight and thin. She spoke as if talking to herself.

"I must do it," she said. "There's no way out. It's just got to be done!"

"You got a pain, or something?" inquired the doctor absent-mindedly, staring at her curiously.

"I'm going to marry Luke Marco!" Judy told him.

The old doctor stopped what he was doing as if he'd been stung by a scorpion. His pointed beard stuck straight out. He scratched his grizzled head viciously with the forceps in his hand.

"You are *what?*" he yelped.

A low cry escaped the girl. She had caught sight of the bandaged figure on the cot in the gloom against the far wall. Doctor Battle followed her gaze.

"Don't mind him," he chuckled. "He stopped some lead in the Mossyhorn. He won't wake up before morning. He'll pull through, though. That feller, he is tougher than a basket of snakes. Only way to kill him would be to amputate his head and hide it."

"I don't expect you or anyone else to understand, Doctor," Judy continued. "But I've got to marry Luke Marco. He's out to ruin Dad—old Steve—if I don't. Dad thinks it's the Hashknife Luke's after. Well, it's true he wants the spread. But, much more than that, he wants—he wants *me!*" She dabbed at her eyes with a glove and continued.

"Yesterday he had a big hard-boiled Texan set fire to the range. Tonight his crew ran off the five hundred beeves Dad had gathered for shipment tomorrow. It was in that raid that Dad got shot. And Luke will keep on doing those things till I marry him.

"Dad bought those beeves as stockers a while back. They're not paid for. And if they're not paid for within forty-eight hours, he'll lose the Hashknife. We're never able to prove it's Marco doing these things, but I know it."

"Steve know about this marrying idea?" asked Doctor Battle, as he threw stuff into his kit.

"No," admitted Judy. "And don't let me catch you telling him. But it's this way, Doctor Battle. . . ."

A WISTFUL note softened the girl's tremulous voice. Rand could feel a tickling sensation along his spine.

"You know how much old Steve has done for me," the girl went on. "Ever since my real dad left me as a baby with Steve and went away and never came back, Steve has been father and mother to me. No human could have been kinder. It was just as though I really were his child, as though my name really was Calhoun, instead of Spengler.

"And the dearest possession on earth to old Steve is the Hashknife. It was home to his father and grandfather before him. Now, the very least I can do to repay him a little bit for all he has done for me, is to save the outfit for him.

"Besides," she concluded with a shudder, her lovely chin lifting as Alamo had seen it lift at the scene of the fire, "I can do it. Luke Marco's a bit rough, maybe, but I'm not afraid of him."

It seemed to Alamo that the room was very quiet after the girl finished her story. The doctor snapped his kit shut and went into the next room for his coat. The girl slipped a glove off, twined her fingers nervously. Outside somewhere, in the silent town, a rooster crowed sleepily. Rand lay and watched the play of flickering lamplight on the girl's tense face.

"So you're Judy Spengler, sure enough," he said to himself. "The gal I came so far to find. You got to have several thousand dollars *pronto* to save the old man's spread. I bring eight thousand of your *dinero* up here, then let Marco and his crew of cutthroats get hold of it. Lew Marco, the same hombre who ain't aimin' to let you get hold of anything—except him!"

His thoughts were bitter.

This time he had bungled the job! Just when he was needed most, he had failed. And the man who had made him fail was the same bullying ruffian who was going to force this girl to marry him. Alamo's unbandaged eye glowed with a fire that promised no good for the sidewinder, Luke Marco.

Judy Calhoun caught a glimpse of that fire. She got up slowly from her chair and came over toward where Alamo lay. Two or three steps away, she stopped. Recognition flamed in her eyes, recognition and—but the light was bad, so Alamo couldn't be sure. But he felt something he had never felt before in the presence of a woman. The slow flush that stained the girl's face was a confession that she felt it too. But she spoke with a scornful curl of her sensitive lips.

"So-o-o!" she whispered. "You got your needings, after all!"

Alamo started to speak. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her the whole story—of the death of her father in far away La Saba, of his long ride to turn over to her the money he had been trusted with.

But what good would it do? The girl wouldn't believe a word of it. Without the money he was a liar on the face of it. She and everyone else would simply conclude that he was trying to feather his nest with the Hashknife crew. His square white teeth clamped on the words.

The little doctor bounced through the rear doorway. "Come on, *Chiquita*," he piped. Picking up his satchel, he clamped a straw sombrero, as big as a table top, on his grizzled head. "Old Thunderheels is hitched to the buggy and he's chewing the bit."

Then he noticed the attitude of the two. "Thundergumption!" he swore. "I pumped enough hop into your leathery hide to hold a hyena from here to high heaven. You have more lives than a sackful of cats. How do you feel?"

"How do you reckon I feel?" grum-

bled Alamo. "Bound up here like a mummy with the mumps."

"You go to sleep!" ordered Dr. Battle. "I'll be back *pronto*. In the morning, if you're strong enough, I'll have some of the boys carry you over to the hotel. You'll have to stay quiet in bed for a couple of weeks."

"He'll stay quiet for longer than that when old Steve gets the drop on him," predicted Judy. "He's the polecat who set fire to the range yesterday."

She swung on the doctor. "I'll ride Redwing."

"You'll do no such a thing!" contradicted Battle testily. "You're plumb tuckered now. You're coming in the buggy with me. I turned Redwing into the corral out back. You can send in for her tomorrow. Come along!"

HE took the girl by the arm and pushed her ahead of him out the door and slammed it behind him. Alamo could still hear his voice as they crossed the veranda.

"Child," he was saying, "in a lifetime of ministering to the wild and the wounded, I have learned considerable about cantankerous humanity. That big rannihan on the cot is, I judge, ornerier than a grizzly with frost-bitten feet. But if he is a range burner, then I am the mother-in-law of a Chinese Mandarin. . . ."

The rest was buried beneath the rattle of flying gravel, as the large bay Morgan, took the dusty old buggy around the corner of the building on two wheels.

The next minute, Alamo Rand was sitting up on the edge of the cot. A minute later, he was standing shakily by hanging onto the edge of the doorway leading to the rear. His head whirled. All the blood in his body seemed to be pounding up the right side of his face and in the top of his skull.

A pint flask of whisky stood on the doctor's desk. Alamo got over to it, tipped it up to his mouth and watched the liquid come down till he choked. From then on he felt more like himself.

He found his hat in a corner, but there was no trace of his guns. When he jammed the hat down over the bandages, his lean face twisted with pain. He took another drink, stuck the flask inside his belt, built and lighted a cigarette. Expelling a huge cloud of thick blue smoke, he smiled grimly through his bandages.

"A hombre as can't go to town in a big way on a diet of white-mule and bull-dust ain't fit to go anywhere," he chuckled.

Five minutes more, and he swung into the girl's saddle on the fleet red mare and slipped quietly out of town. "Redwing," he said, "even if this saddle does seem sort-a short endwise, I reckon you do need a breather."

Then the old hardness stole back into his battered face. His low voice went brittle. He gave the slender-limbed mare her head. She lunged into a long lope that sent the moonlit greasewood and sage streaming by.

"I sort-a suspicion, Redwing," mused Alamo, "you are bringing Luke Marco an oversized package of bad luck!"

CHAPTER IV

Fire on the Cripple M

LATER, when Alamo came in sight of the buildings of Marco's Cripple M, the big spread lay quiet in the light of the waning moon. Not a light showed. Alamo sat his horse in the concealment of a clump of mesquite on a coulee bank and searched the layout with probing eyes.

The sprawling buildings, sheds and corrals were as still as a graveyard. From where he sat, Alamo could see that a brushy gully, on the opposite side of the spread, extended up close to the back of a big haybarn.

He touched Redwing lightly with the spurs, circled the spread at a walk and tied the mare to a scrub sycamore in

the gully. Then, he gained the shelter of the haybarn on foot. From the corner of the barn he again surveyed the quiet yard and buildings.

He could understand that the crew were away on the rustling raid, but his acute senses warned him that the place wasn't deserted, that danger lurked close by. It was no place for a man without a gun.

He slipped along the front of the barn as far as the door. From there, he could see a horse, a bay Morgan, hitched to a buggy near the back door of the house. An indistinct shape moved beneath the buggy, then came out into the moonlight.

It was a big shaggy black dog. That brute lifted his muzzle and sniffed suspiciously. Alamo realized that the faint breeze barely stirring the cottonwood leaves were blowing straight from him to the dog. The burly brute came padding stiffly toward him, a low growl rumbling deep in his throat.

Alamo knew that the slightest disturbance meant quick death. Without a gun he couldn't even put up a fight for his life, let alone recover Judy Calhoun's money and save the girl from a grim fate.

Stepping back out of sight, he hastily searched the pegs along the wall. His hand encountered a rope. With fast but sure movements he quickly shook out a loop, then crouched against the wall and waited.

The guard dog, suspicious but puzzled, crept up to the door and stuck his head in. The bark he started died in his throat, choked off by the hemp that whizzed and jerked snug about his shabby neck. Alamo whisked his end of the rope over a peg and yanked the struggling brute into the air.

"Poor feller," muttered Rand. "You're not to blame for doin' what they feed you for, are you?"

He grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck, so it couldn't turn its head, then stuffed a handful of hay in its mouth and bound its jaw. Letting it down, he tied the animal to a beam, loosening the neck noose. The dog leaped to its feet, angry breath whistling from its nostrils.

"Now, now!" Rand told him. "You just stay hitched, big feller, where you can't bellow or chop a leg off me."

A glance out the door revealed that everything was still quiet. Alamo stole across the yard. A faint sliver of light showed from beneath the blind over a kitchen window. The big prowler flattened himself against the 'dobe wall with his hat in his hand and stealthily lifted his head. What he saw, gave him the face of a killer again.

Five people were seated around a long oilcloth-covered table. Luke Marco was flanked by Deacon Brite, the La Saba gambler with the leaf-shaped scar, and the squat sullen-faced ramrod of the Cripple M, Bronco Yates. Luke Marco took a pull on a square black bottle, then went on with the speech he had been making. A satisfied leer spread over his coarse features as his bloodshot eyes darted back and forth between the faces of Doctor Battle and Judy Calhoun, seated directly across from him.

"So," came Marco's oily voice, "that's the picture. I've got old Steve hid out in the hills, where he's slowly bleedin' to death. The Hashknife crew's scattered all over the range, chasin' false leads. My boys are holdin' Steve's beef where God Himself couldn't find it. And by waylayin' you two on the trail, I got you right where I want you. Are you aimin' to do like I say?"

Alamo's bleak eyes searched the faces of the little physician and the girl. Judy was pale as a sheet. Her full red lower lip was quivering. But her chin was up and her eyes flashing. The wizened little doctor sat crumpled in his chair, as if, for once, life was too much for him.

Alamo's eyes shifted to the black butt of a six-gun on Bronco Yates' right thigh. It wasn't more than ten or twelve feet away, but the window was up only a couple of inches.

"That's the set-up," resumed Luke Marco, enjoying the repetition of what he had to say. "Deacon, here, really is a parson. He will marry us right here and now, all peaceable and proper, with the

good little doctor for one of the witnesses. That triflin' formality over with, we'll have old Steve looked after, the cattle can be shipped tomorrow, so that Steve won't lose the Hashknife, and we'll all live happy ever after."

HE paused to grin ghoulishly. His cruel eyes gloated on Judy's girlish form, bringing a hot flush to her smooth cheeks. His voice took on an edge. His bloated face hardened.

"But if you can't see it my way," he threatened, "then here's what happens. . . .

"Old Steve bleeds to death. The beef gather disappears. And you"—jerking a thumb toward Judy—"well, I'll just take you without troublin' about the marryin' part of it!"

"That last part of it doesn't scare me one bit, Luke," Judy exclaimed. "It's old Steve I'm thinking of. I believe you really *are* low enough to let an innocent old man die, to get what you want. But I won't stand for it."

She leaped to her feet. Her flashing eyes swept the circle of faces. "Keno," she snapped. "Let's get it over with!"

As everyone at the table rose, Alamo got his fingers under the window frame and lifted. But the window was jammed and wouldn't budge. There was only one thing to do. He stepped back a pace, then hurled his two-hundred pounds of bone and muscle through the air.

"Get the book, Bronco," ordered Luke Marco. "It's on the bureau in the—"

The room rocked under the crash, as Alamo hurtled in feet-first, bringing glass and sash with him. Bronco Yates had swung round to head for the other room, putting his left side toward the window and hiding his gun. Landing hard on his feet, Alamo sank a fist like a maul into the foreman's ribs. Yates crashed across the table with a howl of pain.

Luke Marco ripped out an oath and whipped his gun up. Alamo threw himself on top of Yates, made a grab for his gun, missed. Marco's shot rang against the big cookstove in the corner. Judy screamed. The Deacon whisked a hideout gun from his coattails.

Alamo's spurred heel raked viciously up the Deacon's leg. The pasty-faced gambler leaped aside to get into the clear for a shot. But the second slug from Marco's gun took him squarely in the chest. He brought up against the wall, slid limply to the floor, his derringer clattering from his grasp.

Alamo made a dive for it. Bronco Yates was crouched in the wreckage of the table. He squeezed the trigger, but his gun jammed. Seizing it by the barrel, he let it fly. Just as Alamo's groping fingers closed on the Deacon's gun, Yates' flying pistol struck the side of his head with a dull *crunch!*

Rand's head felt as though hornets were swarming inside it. He heard Judy scream again. He saw through a haze of smoke and blood that Luke Marco had grabbed the girl and was twisting her arms behind her.

Through the film that was frowning over his eyes, Alamo saw the furious Yates coming for him, an open jackknife in his hand, the muscles of his leathery face working convulsively. Then the knife came spinning toward him, glittering in the lamplight.

Alamo tried to dodge. But that wicked blow on the side of the head had deadened something within him. His arms and legs felt like leaden weights. His big body refused to obey his will. He saw the hatred in the girl's dilated eyes. And even while that glittering knife was hissing toward him, he realized what Judy was thinking.

She thought he was trying to prevent the wedding for reasons of his own—that in pursuit of some objective that wasn't plain, he was trying to prevent her from saving old Steve Calhoun.

The knowledge sent Alamo reeling. The hissing knife blade missed him, but the heavy horn handle caught him over the temple.

His glassy eyes roved once more over the shambles of the room. Unconsciously, he was seeking someone. Then he remembered who it was. He was looking for Doctor Battle. But the little surgeon had vanished as completely as if he had

been swallowed up by the earth.

Hot lead from Marco's flaming gun spun around. He measured his length on the floor with a bone-shattering crash. The last he remembered was hearing Judy scream again, he couldn't know why.

CHAPTER V

Vengeance Rides Alone

SOMEWHERE in the distance, a clock was striking. Alamo counted the strokes. Three! Something moist and cold was rubbing up and down along his cheek. He opened his one good eye. It was black now. He could smell hay and horse manure. And there was another odor. A low whimper brought him completely to his senses. The other odor was a dog.

Alamo sat up. A weight was across his legs. He pushed it away. It was the limp body of a man. Alamo knew now, where he was. He was lying in the haybarn, with the shaggy black dog trying to lick his face. For the second time, Marco had thought Rand was dead. They had thrown him and Deacon Brite's corpse out of sight in the haybarn.

"You danged old creature from heaven," he mumbled as he freed the dog. "I sure owe you something for wakin' me up."

The dog frisked around his feet and licked his hand as he staggered toward the house.

"I aim to rip that coyote Marco loose from his jugular vein just with my teeth and fingernails!" Rand muttered.

But the house was deserted. Alamo searched every room in the place. He found loaded Colts in a cupboard and returned to the yard. He spotted something light on the ground over near the gate of a little horse corral, staggered over and picked it up. It was Judy's dove-colored Stetson. The crown was bashed in. Either a horse had stepped on it or—but Alamo tried not to think of that.

He lighted matches and examined the ground. Three horses had recently been ridden away from the corral gate. On hands and knees, he trailed them across the yard, around the end of the haybarn, into a trail that wound away through the brush toward the blacker bulk of the distant hills.

Rand's thoughts were dismal—a torture to him. He was the cause of this whole mess—of the loss of the money Judy's dead father had trusted him to deliver, of the girl's being carried off by the merciless Marco, probably, of the death of old Steve Calhoun. And, worst of all, Judy loathed him for a renegade. He could still see the hatred shining in her brown eyes.

He stood there for a minute, looking around. The moon was gone. The faint night breeze whispered coldly in the leaves of the cottonwoods. An owl hooted drearily. The whining of the dog aroused him. The snort of a horse nearby almost lifted him off his feet.

He spun around. There, not ten feet away, with his dappled head reaching over a pasture fence, stood Grayleg. The tall racer whickered inquiringly.

"More gifts from heaven!" muttered Alamo, stepping over and patting the big gelding's arched neck.

The dog was running back and forth. He would start off on the trail of the three horses, jump back toward the man, start on the trail again and then stand looking back, wagging his bushy tail. Alamo finally tumbled.

"Well, you can hang me for a horse thief!" he grinned. Then, he worked fast.

In a few minutes he was swinging along on Grayleg over the trail the fugitives had taken, with the big black dog yelping delightedly in the lead.

"If I can't trail a dog that stays fifteen feet from the front end of my nose," he reflected, "I don't deserve to make Marco eat crow!"

Four or five miles east of the spread, he found himself in as wild a country

as he had ever seen in all his wanderings. The trail twisted over barren shale beds and along narrow ledges in towering rock walls. Without the dog, he could never have followed it. Topping out through the head of a canyon, they wound away through a land of utter desolation.

The cold gray of the false dawn was touching the sharp ridge tops when they pitched suddenly out of the breaks and dropped down through a steep cut into a hidden meadow. He stopped the gray with a slight pressure of his knees and took in the wild scene. The meadow lay beneath him, a hidden cup-shaped valley, rich with grass and water, hidden away in the rocky wilderness. It was the answer to a rustler's dream.

On the far side of the valley, winking uncertainly in the distance, Alamo glimpsed a light. A touch on the big gelding's mane, and they were drifting down toward it.

Fifteen minutes later, Rand was crouching, peering in a window. Luke Marco leered at Judy Calhoun across a split log table, in a low cabin. The tip of his thick tongue darted back and forth over his loose lips. His bloodshot eyes glowed feverishly.

STEAM rose from a mess of *frijoles* simmering in an iron pot in a stone fireplace. Bronco Yates was pacing restlessly up and down before the fire. The scarred bullhides on his bowed legs made a rasping sound. Suddenly, he stopped, stood teetering lightly on his high heels, his restless hands clasped behind him.

"Luke," he began, as if voicing something that had formed definitely in his mind, "I never have been a hog about the cut. But here and now, I'm squawkin'."

The Cripple M owner sensed something coming. He glanced up and caught warning flecks dancing in his foreman's cold lemon-colored eyes. Marco eased his bulk forward slightly in his chair and stealthily drew his feet under him.

"Just what are you drivin' at, Bronco?" he asked softly.

"Just this," replied Yates tightly. "The haul in this deal is considerable. You're gettin' a herd of Hashknife stuff worth ten thousand. You took eight thousand from that dead Border Texan's saddle-bags. If old Steve dies, you get the Hashknife. And—" he paused and boldly eyed the silent Judy admiringly—"you got the filly."

Tense silence gripped the room. The foreman's voice cut like a knife blade when he went on.

"Out of that, you aim to give the five boys a thousand apiece for gettin' the herd out of the country and sold up the trail. And you're offerin' me two thousand. Well"—his harsh voice became a deadly sound—"here's what I'm a-tellin' you. . . .

"You have the gal and the Hashknife. I'll take what we took off the Border Texan, plus what I get for the herd over and above the five thousand comin' to the boys." His talonlike right hand swung closer to the butt of the gun sticking out of his greased holster. "You got any objection?"

Then he made his fatal mistake. From sheer force of habit, he turned his head and spat in the fireplace.

Marco's huge body came up out of his chair and his gun up in a blur, all in the same movement. His long-barreled Bisley belched flame. Bronco Yates got the heavy slug in the left armpit. It tore clear through him and took the life out with it on the other side.

He fell without a moan, his head knocking the bean pot from the tripod. Marco took him by the feet, dragged him clear of the fire and slung him over against the wall, then wiped his hands on his vest. He poured two glasses of whisky, pushed one toward the horrified girl and dumped the other down his throat in a single gulp.

"Nothin' like a good jolt of liquor," he rumbled, "when a man gets a mite upset."

Judy Calhoun had risen slowly to her feet. She was wide-eyed, trembling. She gazed at the burly man across the table as if hypnotized, as she would have gazed at some slimy reptile.

"You—you low-down murderer!" she whispered. "Old Steve would be far better off dying than being saved by marrying you. I wouldn't marry you now, not to save all the lives in Cienega!"

Luke Marco was on her like a wolf on the kill. Judy screamed and backed against the wall. Marco's great hands were on her, ripping her clothing, bruising her flesh.

"That'll do!"

The voice was charged with the menace of death. Marco released the girl and swung around. Alamo Rand lunged at him, and smashed a fist against Marco's jaw—sending the ruffian reeling back. But Marco recovered swiftly. His beefy face turned a sickly gray when he saw that Alamo Rand was wearing a gun. Judy watched as she leaned weakly against the wall. Marco swung as if to flee, so that his back was toward Rand.

"I can't drill a man from the rear," Alamo said in tones that sliced through the silence, "not even a yellow rat. Go for your gun, Marco."

Judy shut her eyes against the gun glare. She tried to close her ears to the thunder that split the room. For an instant then, all was deathly still. The girl heard the muffled thud of a falling body, then the crash and rattle of rifle fire outside. She opened her eyes.

LUKE MARCO lay stretched on his face at her feet. His pistol arm was doubled grotesquely beneath him. Alamo Rand had sunk into a chair. His great shoulders and curly head were hanging over one arm, his smoking gun lay on the floor where it had slipped from his inert fingers. Doc Battle and the hard-eyed Hashknife crew came bursting into the room.

"Tut! Tut!" piped the little surgeon, running over to Judy. "You ain't aiming to faint now." But Judy had. . . .

It was evening. Alamo Rand was stretched out on a cot in the *patio* of the old Hashknife's 'dobe. On another cot, nearby, lay old Steve Calhoun, who had been found in the mountain hideout. Judy rocked slowly in a splint rocking chair.

"The boys are shipping the cattle," murmured Judy, half to herself. "Dad's money is safe. Doc says inside of a couple of weeks you two—whang-leather bobcats, he called you—will be in the saddle. And from now on, there will be peace on the Hashknife. It all seems too good to be true."

Her moist brown eyes rested fondly on Alamo's battered face.

"And to think, Alamo," she added softly, "that you got into all this mess through trying to carry out the dying wishes of a stranger, my dad!"

"I reckon, Judy," grinned Alamo, "this isn't so bad."

"Son," chuckled old Steve, his faded gray eyes flitting from one flushed face to the other, "it could be considerable worse."

Judy's face crimsoned. She slipped out of her chair and whisked away toward the kitchen.

"Both of you," she called back over her shoulder, "should be ashamed of yourselves."

Trouble-shooter Tom Kedrick defies the power of the land-hog of Mustang Town in SHOWDOWN ON THE HOGBACK, an exciting new book-length action novel by Jim Mayo featured in the August GIANT WESTERN—25c at all stands!

Charlie's shot blended with that of the gunfighter

Them Killin' Coes

By RICHARD BRISTER

How can Charlie Coe stop that swaggering slayer—when doing so might betray his own deadly owlhoot heritage?

THE Coes of Kincaid County were a wrong-headed lot, criminal minded, born killers. "Them killin' Coes" was the way the countryside referred to them, and properly, with one exception. Young Charlie Coe steadfastly refused to conform to the pattern set by his outlaw father and brothers. He grew up on the dodge, as a Kincaid County Coe naturally had to. He was forced to hear a lot of hard talk about no-good badge toters. He learned to draw and shoot from the hip with enough gunspeed to uphold the tribe's gunhandy traditions.

But he never could learn to draw and shoot at a man, and he was no earthly

good on a raid. That is the reason why he wasn't along on the Dingman Bank job, when the tribe got wiped out.

Charlie Coe took the news pretty hard. But there was one bright spot on the bleak horizon.

He saw that he could now escape from a way of life which never had suited his nature.

He shaved off his mustache and his spade beard and rode due west for five days, until he reached a sizzling little desert town called Lizard City. Charlie had a knack with guns. He got himself a job helping Old Man Sawtelle, who had a gunsmith shop across from the Lizard City Dry Goods.

"What's your name, son?" the old man asked him.

"Poe," said Charlie. He hated to start his new life out with a lie, but he knew doggone well that Charlie Coe, the last of "them killin' Coes," would live no longer than a mad dog in Lizard City. "Poe," he repeated. "Charlie Poe."

"Well, son," the old man said, "I'm gettin' along up in years. I need an assistant and you seem pretty handy. I'll give you a try."

The old man's eyes were not good and his hand was not steady. As the weeks passed, he shifted more and more of the finer work over on Charlie. He was greatly pleased with his new assistant, and honest enough to make no bones about it.

"Best move I ever made, hirin' that young feller. Regular wizard fixin' guns. Steady worker, too. Ain't a lazy bone in his body."

In a town of thirteen hundred and forty-two people, news like this gets around. In due time, Charlie heard what Old Man Sawtelle thought of his work. He was immensely pleased. He thought that he had pushed the old life well behind him. Then, too, Old Man Sawtelle had a daughter. She was nineteen. She had wonderfully large, honest blue eyes, a lovely mouth which seemed always to find something to smile at. Her name was Milly, and Charlie thought that there never had been, or ever would be, a name quite so pretty as Milly.

HE told her so one night as they sat together on the Sawtelle front steps.

"Gosh, that's a pretty name," Charlie said. "Just fits you, Milly."

"You mean I'm pretty too?" she said in that warm voice with the little laughing tone in it that told him she was partly teasing.

"You sure are," he said.

"I'm glad, Charlie."

"Glad?"

"That you think I'm pretty."

There was a nice big moon up there in the sky, smiling down at them, sort of giving its blessing to Milly and Charlie. Milly snuggled up against him, and Charlie could feel his heart start to pound, could feel a pressure grow at his temples.

He never had been like this with a girl before, and the arm which swung around Milly's soft shoulder was uncertain of its right to be there, and awkward. Girls are instinctively more at home, at such times. Milly didn't seem to mind about the arm. In fact, she seemed to think it was perfectly all right for the arm to be there. Charlie was encouraged, and when Milly turned her head up toward him, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to reach down and press his lips against hers.

It was Charlie's first kiss, and it made him quiver with excitement. "Gosh," he said huskily, "you're wonderful, Milly. You're the most wonderful girl in the world."

"You're awful nice too," Milly said. He could feel her honest blue eyes gazing at him, there in the moonlight, as she added, "I never kissed anybody like that before. Just child kisses in silly games."

"I hope not," said Charlie, almost fiercely, and his arm tightened about Milly's shoulder. This girl was his now. He promised himself he would marry Milly Sawtelle some day. He did not pop the question that night though, for he was one of "them killin' Coes," and it was going to take time to erase his memories of his ugly background.

Until he won the complete respect of this town, until he was earning a re-

spectable income, he had no right to ask a girl like Milly to share his fortunes.

She wore a puzzled look as they parted that night, as if she had expected him to say something. Charlie felt a small twinge of guilt about that. But he told himself he had done the right thing.

In the shop the next morning Old Man Sawtelle asked a few cautious questions.

"Son, I understand it ain't considered just proper to be askin' a Western man where he rode in from. But I'll admit I'm right curious about your background."

"I—uh—I'd rather not talk about that, if it's all the same to you," Charlie fumbled.

"Well, the fact is," said the old man, "the girl's gone kind of sweet on you. Milly's all I've got in this world, and it's mighty important to me what kind of a man she takes a shine to."

"I can understand that," said Charlie.

"But you still don't feel like talkin', hey, son?"

"I can promise you I'll never purposely do anything to hurt you or Milly, Mr. Sawtelle. You've treated me mighty fine, I'm not forgetting."

"All right, son," the old man said, a bit doubtfully. "I reckon that's good enough for me."

Charlie felt relief, but he saw the shrewdness of the old man's tactics. By not prodding, Sawtelle had increased Charlie's feeling of indebtedness to him. *I could never marry the girl without layin' my cards on the table. Not after the decent treatment he's handed out to me,* thought Charlie.

An honest conscience is a handicap in most of the affairs of man. Charlie found himself acting stand-offish toward Milly, in the weeks that followed. He was afraid of the girl's power to intoxicate him with her charms. For he felt unworthy of her. He was living a lie both to her and her father.

YET, if he admitted his identity as a Coe, he would be condemning himself. How often his father had said, "Boys, if it ever comes to a showdown, we might's well go down with both guns a-blazin'. None of us can earn anything better than a hangrope, if he is taken alive."

Charlie fought an unending battle between his desire for Milly Sawtelle and his feelings of being unworthy. Nights when he refused to let himself call on the girl turned out to be mighty lonely. He took to spending spare hours in the Tin Bucket Saloon, playing low-stake stud poker with Doc Entwhistle, the veterinarian, George Peters, the groom from the Lizard City Livery Stables, and Chester Dinwoodie, who worked in the dry goods store.

One night a stranger walked into the Bucket. He was a tall, mean-eyed rannigan, with coal-black hair, bent shoulders, and a limp in his walk. He shot a real hard look in Charlie's direction, when he came in, but Charlie was holding two aces up and one in the hole at the time, so he didn't notice how much attention he was receiving from the newcomer.

An hour passed, during which time the stranger took aboard more rotgut booze than he comfortably could carry. He came walking over to the table where Doc, George, Chester, and Charlie were playing stud poker.

"Ain't I seen you somewheres, mister?" he said to Charlie, in a harsh voice.

Charlie looked up from his cards. "It's possible," he said mildly. "I never saw you before, friend. Not that I know of."

"Somethin' in your eyes," said the stranger. "And in the cut of your mouth."

His tone was not friendly. In fact, there was a threat in this man's manner. Charlie felt a coldness touch him inside, for he had Coe eyes and a Coe mouth and he was well aware of it. He shrugged, smiling uncertainly at Doc and the others, and turned his back on the stranger.

"I'll get you," said the tall man with the limp in his walk. "It'll come to me, before this evenin's over." He went back to the bar, where the half-empty bottle of booze waited for him.

Something sinister about the tall,

raven-haired stranger sent prickles of worry through Charlie, but he did not move from his place at that poker table, for to have done so, he felt, would only act as a prod to the tall stranger's curiosity about him. He would have to sit here and brazen things out, he decided.

Toward closing, the stranger still had not solved the puzzle he had set for himself. Liquor had befuddled his mind, had turned him proddy drunk. He staggered over to where Charlie sat, placed his hands on the table, and peered owlishly into Charlie's tense face. The rickety table teetered, spilling cards and poker chips onto the sawdust-covered floor.

"It ain't come to me yet," said the stranger. "I still haven't placed you."

"Haven't you?" said Charlie.

"I know one thing, though," said the stranger. "I've seen that ugly face of yours somewheres before, or one mighty like it. Mister, there's somethin' about you that makes my gunhand mighty itchy."

Suddenly the big room was deathly quiet. Charlie sat there with his hands flat on the deal table, his friends grouped stiffly around him. Charlie was wearing a six-gun, and as a member of the gunhandy Coe clan, he felt that he could, if he chose to, kick this table against the stranger's legs, then draw and shoot from a sitting position in time to beat him.

And if he did so, he might as well hang a sign on himself, advertising his identity as a Coe. For there was something special and unmistakable about the Coe style of shooting.

Charlie said in the steadiest voice he could manage, "Friend, you and me haven't any real quarrel, no matter how much you think so." He arose from the table, moving very slowly, keeping his hands up in plain view. Almost casually, he turned his back on the stranger, and walked toward the half-doors of the Tin Bucket Saloon.

NEWS of this impending trouble must have traveled the grapevine of this little town, for even as Charlie walked toward those doors, they swung inward to the push of big, beefy-faced Matt Gordon. Matt Gordon was the Law —the town marshal here in Lizard City, and what he lacked in gunspeed he made up in devotion to duty.

"Watch out!" he yelled at Charlie, and gave Charlie a shove which sent him sprawling into the bar. At the same time, Charlie heard a drunken snarl from the tall stranger behind him, followed by the blast of a six-gun. Matt Gordon's own six was out, and it was he who took the slug intended for Charlie. It caught the marshal through the flesh of his side, and probably the pain of that hot lead burrowing through his flesh caused the lawman to shoot to kill, as he lined his own six-gun on the stranger. Gordon's pistol roared.

The tall stranger let out a choking sound, then crumpled to the floor, gurgling as blood from his punctured chest forced itself past his loose lips. He was dead in less than a minute.

Charlie looked at him, then at the marshal.

"You hit bad, Matt?"

Marshal Matt Gordon pulled his shirt out and looked at his wound. "Appears like he just creased me, Charlie."

"I ain't going to forget this," said Charlie.

"What was it all about?" said the lawman, downing at one gulp the glass of whisky which the bartender brought him.

"He figured he knew me from somewheres. Couldn't place me but he got some fool notion into his head that he had a grudge to settle."

"Did he?" said the marshal.

Charlie looked right into the lawman's eyes. "I never saw that man before in my life, Matt.

"All right," said the lawman. "That's good enough for me, Charlie. You and some of the boys tote him down to the funeral parlor, will you? I better go get this little wound fixed up."

So ended the incident of the tall, mean-eyed stranger. He was buried without ceremony in the Lizard City Boot Hill the next morning, and quickly forgotten.

Forgotten, that is, by all but Charlie.

Charlie couldn't sleep nights, remembering how the stranger had jockeyed him and tried to get him into a gunfight. It was in Charlie's eyes and in the cut of his mouth that he was a Coe, and as long as he lived, Charlie supposed, there would be these brutal reminders of the life he had left behind him.

"I'd be dead right now," thought Charlie, "if it wasn't for Matt Gordon happenin' to walk in just when he did. Wouldn't I make a fine, dependable husband for a girl like Milly! I wonder when the next stranger will come driftin' in, recognize the Coe in me, and call for a showdown."

He avoided Milly Sawtelle more carefully now. The girl had her pride and could be as stubbornly aloof as could Charlie. It cut him to shreds inside when she turned icy eyes toward him, and he turned in on himself, brooding and mooning over his troubles more than was healthful. It showed up in his work.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" Old Man Sawtelle said. "You're getting forgetful and clumsy as an old woman."

"I'm sorry," said Charlie.

"Sorry don't get customers back, when your moony ways have sent 'em away from here discontented, young fellow."

"If you want me to leave, Mr. Sawtelle, just say so."

"Never said that," the old man snapped. "Don't you be putting words in my mouth, young man."

Charlie hung on. Fixing guns was the only trade he knew. It hurt having to see Milly so often. And yet it would hurt as much not to see her, he knew.

The annual Cattlemen's Dance was coming, and Thursday, when Charlie still hadn't asked her for it, Milly cornered him at his workbench in the shop and challenged him about it.

"What's the matter with us, Charlie? What is it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Charlie Poe, the Cattlemen's Dance is Saturday night, and here it is Thursday. If you think I'm going to stand here and *ask* you to take me, well, you're just crazy."

"Why, I wouldn't expect nothin' like that of you, Mill. You know that."

"WELL?" she said. Milly was mad, Charlie could see. And when she was mad, she was awful pretty. It was enough to turn him inside out with yearning.

"I'm sorry, Mill. I—uh—I ain't much on dancin'. Never learned proper."

"Maybe I'd better go with somebody else then," said Milly, "since you're so reluctant about it."

"I guess maybe you better," said Charlie, and felt that if he wasn't a man grown, he'd break out crying.

The next day, Friday, was pretty bad, but things came to a head inside of him toward Saturday evening, when he had to sit in the Tin Bucket with a lonesome beer in front of him and imagine Milly dancing with one young fellow after another, down there at the Town Hall. Charlie was at a low ebb for fair, and he had about decided that the only sensible thing for him to do was retreat, get out of town, before he broke down and proposed marriage to Milly.

"I'm a Coe, and I ain't got the right to marry a girl like Mill," he told himself fiercely.

But it is not in the moth to resist the flame, nor was it in Charlie to break away completely from the pleasure of Milly's presence. He stayed, and the weeks dragged on. Milly Sawtelle was seen around town a good deal with young Chester Dinwoodie, the clerk from the Dry Goods. And Charlie's work, as jealousy consumed him, became less and less a matter of pride to him.

He was not doing a good job, and he knew it. He felt that Mr. Sawtelle would have to let him go, and in a way, Charlie welcomed that idea, as a solution to his problems, of a sort.

But the old man said nothing untoward to him, and on a blistering hot day in August, a man named Wottrell rode into Lizard City. He was a long, thin man, with a beaked nose, and raven black hair, and Charlie Coe had once watched him shoot a hole through a man. down in Tucson. It had been an impressive

performance, as Charlie remembered. The man's nickname, he recalled, was "Strike," because his lightning-fast grab for his gun was like the strike of a rattler.

Strike Wottrel walked into the Tin Bucket, where Charlie was playing solitaire, that hot day in August. Wottrel fixed his hard black eyes on those of "Fatty" Remson, the Bucket's number two barman, and said, "Tall, slope-shouldered feller, with a limp in his walk. Black hair like mine. That description mean anything to you?"

"It sure does," said Fatty Remson, who was more eager to please than diplomatic. "Drifted in here a month back, your man did. Got a mean drunk on and commenced to make gun trouble. Law had to down him."

Strike Wottrel's lean body went taut, there in front of the bar, and he said in a low voice, "You mean he's dead? Jack's dead?"

"He sure is," said the barman, who was beginning to see he had talked out of turn, and was casting glances in Charlie's direction. "Thought you had a grudge on this man, friend. Wouldn't of spoke out so quick if I'd knowed he meant somethin' to you. Wasn't nobody's fault but his own, though, and that's a fact. He sure come in here huntin' for trouble."

"Shut up, you fat fool! Jack never started a fight without havin' some sensible reason." His voice turned silky. "Just where will I find this John Law that done in my brother?"

Fatty Remson opened his pudgy mouth, then let his jaw hang suspended, as Charlie waved him to silence from his solitaire table. Strike Wottrell turned around and fixed his black eyes on Charlie.

"That ain't just smart, friend: I don't like smooth-faced young strangers cuttin' in on my affairs. Just you nose in some more and I'm like to put a hole through your meddlin' head."

Strike Wottrell turned to face Fatty Remson, who was a jellylike blob of sheer terror by now. "Where's this John Law hang out, Fatty?"

"Down th-the s-street two blocks. O-on th-this side. M-marshal's office."

"What's his name?"

"Matt G-Gordon."

ABRUPTLY Strike Wottrel turned and marched out through the swing doors of the Tin Bucket Saloon. Fatty Remson stared pop-eyed at Charlie.

"My gosh, he'll kill Matt, Charlie. You see them killer's eyes? Like a snake. He'll make dead meat out of Matt."

"And it's my fault," Charlie said dully.

"Y-your f-fault. Are y-you c-crazy?"

"If his brother Jack hadn't taken such a sudden dislike to me," said Charlie, "and tried to gun me down from behind, Matt wouldn't of killed him. Matt saved my life, Fatty. And look at the thanks he's going to get for it. This feller will kill him."

"Matt ain't exactly a s-slouch though."

"That was Strike Wottrel. He's lightning on the draw. I saw him kill a man down in Tucson. Matt can't stand up against him."

Fatty Remson wiped beads of moisture from his forehead with the end of the filthy bar apron. "B-but what c-can we d-do, Charlie?"

Charlie sat there, and he was thinking, Matt saved my life. And because he saved my life, he's about to lose his, if I permit it. I've got to go out there and cut myself in against Wottrel. No matter what happens, I'll lose. If he drills me, I'm dead. If I beat him to the draw, this town will put two and two together and recognize me for a Coe, and I'll die on the end of a hangrope.

He got up and hurried out of the saloon. Sunlight pushed at his eyes, and he blinked rapidly, trying to get adjusted to the brightness outside. He looked up the long street toward Matt Gordon's office, and saw that Strike Wottrel was making slow progress toward it. The killer had gone only one block.

Charlie walked up the boardwalk swiftly, loosening his six-gun in the holster. He came within forty yards of Wottrel before the killer heard the swift tattoo of Charlie's bootheels on the planks, and sensed the uncommon urgency of

Charlie's steps. He turned, and the black eyes swept up and down Charlie's tense figure.

"Kind of hot for a man to be in such an all-fired hurry," Strike Wottrel suggested.

Charlie stepped down carefully into the dusty street. "Your brother was gunning for me, Wottrel, when our local law shot him. I ain't planning to let the marshal do any more of my gunfighting for me."

"And just who," said the killer, "might you be, young feller?"

Charlie was aware of watchful eyes down the long street, in windows and doorways. His town was watching him carefully in this moment, and he wanted to act the part of a man now. He wondered if Milly was down at the gunsmith shop with the old man, and if she was watching him now.

"Just call me Trouble, Wottrel, because you sure got to gun me down before you'll ever get to the marshal."

A rattler will sometimes warn its victim before it strikes, but Strike Wottrel was a human snake who scoffed at such tactics. Even as Charlie finished his speech, Wottrel's lean, lithe body was twisting, jerking into the professional gunman's crouch. The long brown hand was snapping against the butt of the six-gun, bringing it out and up into training a blur of lethal motion.

This was Strike Wottrel's killer technique, to catch his victim napping and off balance. But Charlie Coe was one victim who was not caught by surprise, having seen this man in action beforehand. His own gun came out even as Wottrel's was lifted clear of the leather.

The two crashing reports came together, volleying up and down the canyon of the sweltering street. Charlie was hit in the hip, thrown back heavily into the swirling dust. He fought off the numbing shock of the pain and tried to sight on Strike Wottrel, who was still on his feet, down the street there.

Wottrel was bringing his gun up for another shot. Charlie thumbed the hammer at him, saw he had missed, and swore in panic, realizing there was no chance for him now. Wottrel's gun was up and he was aiming carefully. Suddenly his knees gave way underneath him, and he pitched headlong into the dusty street. . . .

STRIKE WOTTREL was dead. On a bunk in Sawtelle's shop, Charlie lay grinning at Marshal Matt Gordon.

"You mean to say you had me marked out for a Coe right along? You weren't taken in by the masquerade I was running? Why'd you let me go, Matt?"

"I stepped outside of the law once or twice as a boy, Charlie," said Marshal Matt Gordon. "I'm strong for a man who really wants to go straight. Listen, I know all about you, kid. You were born a Coe, but without any Coe meanness in you. You never rode on any murderin' sprees with the gang, and the law always figured to go easy on you if you ever were taken."

"I always thought they'd string me up to the nearest tree, Matt."

"Kid, you got to forget about bein' a Coe. You couldn't help bein' born into that outfit. But you can stand on your record here in Lizard City. You been straight as a stick with the old man and the girl. And this town ain't soon going to forget you could have sat out this trouble with Wottrel, if you had a mind to. . . . I got some friends up at the State Capitol, Charlie. I been workin' on a pardon for you, and if what happened today don't clinch it for you, I'll turn in my law badge."

"Gosh, Matt!" Charlie beamed. "That's the best thing ever happened to me. No foolin'."

A few minutes later, he was alone with Milly, and in her gentle way she was scolding: "You silly thing. As if I ever cared who your people were or where you'd come from. It's what a man *is* that really matters," Milly said, so firmly, and with such a light in her blue eyes that Charley finally had to believe it.

Suddenly he felt differently toward the world.

He knew he belonged. And that was really the best thing that ever had happened to him.

THE PAUPER from PECOS

True to the pledge he made her dying outlaw brother,
gun-swift Slim Teague sides Julie Fenton in her fight
to save her ranch—hoping she'll never know his secret!

an action novelet by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

CHAPTER I

Gunman's Bluff

THE giant red mare with the shaggy, burr-tangled man was almost as seedy-looking as the lean-bodied rider who straddled her broad back.

Slim Teague pushed his shapeless old Stetson back on a thatch of yellow hair, and mopped his tanned forehead with a frayed red bandanna. His levis were faded and patched; his boots toed into stirrups showed worn-down heels. A rip in the sleeve of his dark blue shirt bared a lean muscled arm.

Teague slid loosely from the saddle, and dropped the reins over the sagging fence that separated him from the little ranchhouse. He looked, for all his worn rigging, like a gawky, overgrown kid wearing clothes handed down from his oldsters—even the long-barreled Colt tied low on his lean right leg. But it took no practised eye to note its clean, well-oiled appearance, or the smooth, well-greased holster that it rested in.

A slight frown creased Teague's bronzed forehead as he listened to the heavy voices that floated through the open front door of the ranchhouse. His lips puckered a little, and cool gray eyes flicked a quick glance at the three horses tethered further down the fence.

Three men were inside the house, and, unless he was on the wrong spread, a lone girl. Teague ducked under the mare's neck, and strode through the gaping fence gate.

Yes, there was a girl. As he padded up to the front porch he heard her strained voice break through a man's hoarse laugh.

"But he will be here, Mr. Webber. I wrote Jim a month ago, and gave the letter to Bret Laird, one of my boys, to deliver. Jim should have it by now. Just give me a few more days."

A strident voice lashed out. Slim Teague smiled thinly. Jim Fenton's dying words had given a good description—a voice that sounded like the crack of a bull-whip. This would be Cash Webber.

"You've harped on that story about your brother ridin' up to pay this note long enough, Miss Julie. Jim's no good, or he'd have been here when your dad died. I gave you plenty of time to raise the cash. Now I want my money."

THE girl spoke again with weary resignation.

"But I have no money. Not even

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"We'll find a way to get you out of this trouble," Teague said

enough to pay Sandy and Cotton a month's back wages. They've stuck by me, but two men can't do much of a job on this range. We had every head of cattle we've got bunched up on the north range, but a week ago rustlers drove them off."

Cash Webber boomed angrily, "Every head! Why, girl, that herd was just the same as mine. Any sign of where they went?"

"No. No sign."

"Sounds strange! How could three hundred head just disappear? If you've sold those cattle out from under my nose, I'll have something to say about that."

Crouching outside the door, Slim Teague's eyes narrowed slightly. He smiled faintly as he heard Julie Fenton's voice edge with sarcasm.

"Don't worry, Mr. Webber. I don't need money bad enough to steal it from you."

Someone chuckled hoarsely.

Webber spoke in a low, suggestive tone. "Sure. Sure, Miss Julie, I didn't mean it that way. Of course I'll expect my money when the note's due this Saturday. But—well, you know what I said the other day. You can change your mind even yet."

Julie Fenton snapped angrily. "I answered that question once. You can go now, Mr. Webber, and take those two grinning fools with you."

Someone laughed coarsely.

"Listen to the little wild-cat, boss. Listen to her chirp. She's too good for you."

Webber cut in heavily. "That's what she thinks, but I'll show her. Come here, you little spitfire. By jinks, I'll show you!"

From inside sounded the sharp slap of flesh on flesh. Webber cursed and a man guffawed without humor. Then Slim Teague's lanky body stood framed in the doorway.

"What's up, gents? Maybe a private party, huh?"

Teague's drawling words caused two hard faced men to whirl in their tracks. One of them, a wizened runt, stared at the stranger in the doorway, out of eyes that were glassy, unfocused. At the wizened man's side a chunky, thick-shouldered man, went into a tense crouch, with his hand hovering, clawlike, near the butt of a low-swung Colt.

Teague swept them with cool eyes. A breath of a smile traced his smooth face, and he shifted his frosty eyes to meet Cash Webber's dark glare.

"Sure," Teague drawled cheerfully. "It is a party. Dang it, I was just telling myself how lonesome I was. Mind if I stick around, gents?"

The thick-shouldered man stepped forward threateningly, then halted with uncertainty when he realized that the lanky stranger had given him no attention.

WEBBER, a hulking giant of a man, his big arms still clamped around the struggling girl, stared balefully at the stranger. His thick, puffy lips moved slowly.

"You're alive, pilgrim, and young. If you want to stay that way, you better slope pronto."

Teague smiled coolly. The half smile on his lips thinned a little, fading into a chill quirk of drawn lips.

"Sure, now, I'm peaceable. I don't mean to bust up your fun, only"—his quiet drawl suddenly took on a hard edge—"take your hands off that girl, you thick-lipped ape!"

Livid anger flared on Cash Webber's heavy features. He spun the girl to one side with a sweep of his big arms; his strident voice cracked out.

"You forgot your manners, pilgrim."

His deadly rumble was a signal for action from the two gunmen who poised tensely at one side. The man with the thick shoulders lurched forward. He staggered back an instant later from a balled fist that suddenly snapped up from nowhere and smashed into his mouth.

The wizened man merely stood still. His right hand blurred down to a walnut-handled Colt, jerked upward. But before it could clear leather, Teague had slid in close. His stride was catlike.

There was no wasted motion in that smooth, quick glide, that appeared recklessly slow. Yet the wizened gunman found himself spinning head-on into Cash Webber, who was clawing for his gun. When they got themselves untangled, the lanky stranger was leaning back easily against the wall. And a battered old Colt had become an alert, dangerous weapon, gripped in a nerveless hand.

"Reckon the party's over, gents," Teague drawled. "Mighty sorry, too, because it was just getting interesting."

The thin smile was back on Slim Teague's lips again, and for the first time Cash Webber noticed the cold, deadly glint in the stranger's pale eyes.

Webber, frozen in a half crouch, relaxed slowly. His hulking body straightened, but he couldn't erase the grim pucker of his thick lips. His small eyes flitted to his two gunmen who were pushing up from the floor. Webber grinned wolfishly.

"We blew up too fast, stranger. So thundering fast that we got in each other's way. Put up the gun, mister. You got us wrong. Miss Julie's an old friend of mine. Neighbors. We were just funnin'."

The twist of Slim Teague's lips worked into a more pronounced smile, but the gun in his hand didn't relax. His narrow gaze took in the poisonous glint in the wizened man's eyes and saw the silent promise in the way the thick-shouldered man spat blood from his smashed lips.

"Sure," Teague drawled. "I was only funnin', too. When I mean business, I get real rough. Folks say I plumb lose my head. But I reckon we'd best break up the party anyhow."

Webber shrugged heavy shoulders. He cast a meaning glance at the girl, still huddled in the corner.

"Maybe you're right," he rumbled. "No use of wearing out our welcome. Anyhow we'll be back Saturday and have some real fun. Will you be here then, pilgrim, or are you plannin' on driftin'?"

"I'll be around. I like the looks of the country hereabouts. Might be some good hunting with all the snakes and skunks I've seen already."

Webber flushed darkly. His puffy lips worked loose from yellow, clenched teeth.

"Glad to hear that. We'll be lookin' forward to seein' you again, stranger."

Teague slid back along the wall as the three men filed out of the room. He followed them out on the porch, watched as they strode stiffly toward their horses.

Halfway to the fence gate, Cash Webber turned, stared back at the lanky stranger.

"By the way," he rumbled, "what did you say your name was?"

"Fenton," Teague drawled easily. "Jim Fenton. I'm Julie's brother."

Webber chuckled hoarsely.

"Thanks. Just wanted to know in case you found you had to leave before Saturday. I'll be lookin' you up again right soon."

CHAPTER II

The Lawman's Way

SLIM TEAGUE waited on the porch until the three men had disappeared over a low hill that loomed against Del Norte Mountains. He sheathed his gun, and turned to see the girl standing behind him, regarding him with wide, dark eyes. Her oval face was still pale, but there was a firm set to her chin. A lock of coppery hair had dropped down over her tanned forehead.

Teague dropped his eyes and then shifted his lanky body uncomfortably. His hands brushed awkwardly over his faded blue shirt, shook powdery dust from his patched levis. The worn toe of his right boot traced a nervous pattern on the front porch floor.

"Reckon that I have mussed up things, miss," he apologized. "I haven't any manners at all."

"Who are you?" she asked. Her voice was low and cool, yet there was a timbre of warmth in it.

Teague looked up grinning. "Fenton, ma'am," he said. "Jim Fenton. I just drifted in from nowhere."

She laughed shortly. "I know that; but what's your real name?"

A little frown wrinkled Teague's smooth forehead.

"Doggone," he complained. "It's gettin' so a man can't change his name without having to answer a lot of questions. Well, if you want to know, it's Slim Teague. From up Pecos way."

The girl said nothing for a moment. Teague watched her from under the shadow of his battered hat. She was small, would about come up to his shoulders, he decided, and her boots hinted small shapely feet. A vagrant ray from the setting sun shimmered in her coppery hair. Her lips were full, yet firm and moist. Her eyes looked purple against her golden skin.

"You were a fool to do what you did," she said at length. "Webber is a killer. So are Sliver and Chunky, the men with him."

Teague grinned cheerfully. "Shucks, ma'am, I wouldn't have hurt 'em."

She didn't see his humor. "I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't showed up. I've only got two men working for me, and they're out trying to find the trail of my rustled cattle. You see, Cash Webber—"

Her voice trailed off nervously.

"Yeah, I know. I heard part of it when I rode up."

"Is that how you knew Jim's—my brother's name?"

Teague nodded.

"Oh, I'm glad. Something sort of flashed through me. I was afraid—afraid maybe Jim wasn't coming home. But how did you happen to ride here to the F Dash?"

Teague fingered the rip in his shirt sleeve. "Jobs are sort of hard to find," he said. "Thought maybe you might need another hand here."

"You mean you came here looking for a job?"

Teague nodded. "Sure. This spread just happened to be next in line. Perhaps you could use another man, Miss—Miss Fenton. I could make myself sort of handy."

The girl laughed quickly.

"Oh, I'm sure you could. The way you handled"—her voice trailed off into low, tense words. "But I couldn't pay you," she went on. "I have no money, won't even have the ranch much longer. I owe you too much already."

Teague looked up from the tip of his boot.

"You mean you would hire me if it wasn't for that? Aw, that's all right. These duds will last with a little more patching, I reckon. And you can pay me when things get straightened out."

HE dropped his eyes again when he saw moisture suddenly well in the girl's eyes.

"Oh, if you only would!"

"Sure, I'll take the job. And much obliged. I was down to my last two-bits, and there wasn't another hitch in my belt. Three meals a day is mighty inviting."

Julie Fenton turned quickly and went into the house. Teague hesitated a moment, then followed. He found her standing in the middle of the room biting her lips as if she wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words.

Suddenly she noticed a red gash across Teague's knuckles where his fist had smashed into the chunky gunman's teeth during the fight. She bent swiftly, pulling his hand close.

"You're hurt!" she cried. "I'll get some bandages."

"Shucks, ma'am, this is nothing."

But she was gone. Slim Teague shrugged his wide shoulders, and absently picked up a chair that had been knocked to the floor during the scuffle. His cool gray eyes worked over the big room.

A fireplace at one end of the room was topped by a mantel over which was a set of deer horns holding a heavy Sharps rifle. Teague strode across the room, picked the rifle from the cradle.

The slow easing down of the lever showed a brass casing in the chamber. Teague put the gun back in place.

The wide mantel held a single picture. It stood in the middle, a faded tintype of a young man. Slim Teague bent close, his cool eyes taking in the high forehead of the man in the picture, the wide sensitive mouth, the loose, weak chin.

A bunched muscle worked spots of white in Teague's lean jaw. This was a picture of Jim Fenton, the man he had killed a week before in the saloon at Pecos.

The grim thought stirred something cold inside Teague's chest. How could he tell this wide-eyed girl that he had killed her brother? How could he tell her that a slug from his Colt had burned down the man who had been known as Jess Venters, leader of the gang of gunmen who had terrorized the country around Pecos.

Teague's long fingers drifted up to the pocket of his blue shirt, and closed over a small badge pinned under the flap. His worn shirt, his patched levis, the scuffed-up, slant-heeled boots he wore made him look like any of the shiftless saddle-bums who roamed the range. But inside his pocket was a small badge that made him Slim Teague, Deputy U. S. Marshal.

He had trailed Jess Venters over half of New Mexico and Southwest Texas. It had been a long, dangerous trail, and it ended with the sheriff of Reeves County raiding the gang's hideout while Teague himself stalked the outlaw leader in a six-gun showdown.

Venters had died telling of his sister on the little ranch far to the south, and making Teague promise to see that she was all right.

The lanky lawman was still staring vacantly at the picture when Julie Fenton's voice sounded behind him.

"That's Jim, my brother. He had that picture taken in Marfa five or six years ago, just before he rode away. I haven't seen him since, although he writes once in a while. He's a sort of traveling representative of the Cattlemen's Association. He was always rather restless, and couldn't stay long in one place. Lately he's been on the move so much that I haven't been able to keep in touch with him."

Teague turned slowly, stared into the girl's dark eyes.

"You don't know where he is?"

"Yes, well, not exactly. The last time we heard from him he was going up around Pecos."

Teague was silent while the girl tied up his left hand. She had just finished, when the sudden clatter of hoofs sounded outside the house.

HE saw color drain quickly from the girl's face. Teague's eyes narrowed grimly. With swift, yet cool movement, he pushed her back in one corner of the room. Then he dragged out his battered Colt, and crossed the room in three long strides to stand behind the door.

The next instant heavy boots thumped on the porch, and two men crashed into the room.

"Far enough," Teague rapped. "Reach!"

They didn't reach. The man in the lead, a rangy, sandy-haired man with a red neck, twisted around savagely.

The other, white-haired, grizzled, simply hopped into the air, and came down facing the opposite direction with his gnarled fist clawing out a Colt.

"Sandy! Cotton! Don't!"

The girl's quick scream ripped across the room even as Teague's finger tensed on the trigger. He straightened his hand swiftly, letting the six-gun clatter to the floor.

"Yuh win, gents," he drawled. "I reckon we're both on the same side."

The grizzled man with the white hair strode forward. "Who are you, stranger?" he challenged.

Julie Fenton ran up before Slim Teague could frame a reply.

"It's all right, Cotton," she said. "He's Slim Teague."

"Who is Slim Teague?" The grizzled man didn't holster his gun. "On this maverick range names don't mean much."

The girl spoke quickly, telling how Teague had ridden up just in time to throw Cash Webber and his gunmen out of the house when they threatened her. Finally Cotton could contain himself no longer.

"You mean this fuzz-lip buffaloed them three killers? We saw 'em ride away while we were up on Sun Ridge. We know how that thick-lipped skunk feels about you, so we hustled down here to see if everything was all right."

The grizzled man shoved his gun into its holster, thrust out a gnarled fist.

"Dang it," he said gruffly. "You're aces high, stranger! I want to shake hands with the man who could put the hobbles on those three skunks. I'm Cotton Simms. This sour-faced cowhand is Sandy Burris."

Teague grinned and shook hands, coolly conscious that the two men were eying his worn clothing with frank curiosity.

"Mr. Teague wants a job here," Julie Fenton said.

Cotton Simms' keen eyes probed Teague's face.

The girl went on. "I've told him everything, and he's still willing to take the chance of getting his money later."

"Sure, that's right," said Slim Teague and grinned. "Jobs are scarce, and I'm broke. A good meal is better than taking up a notch in your belt."

"All right with me," Cotton said gruffly. "We can use a good man."

After supper, which Julie cooked and served the three men in a room that was just off the kitchen and had been converted into a dining room, Teague found himself alone with the girl. She sat on a packing box near the table.

"Don't worry, Julie," Teague said, patting her shoulder. "We'll find a way to get you out of this trouble."

Before either of them could say anything further Cotton Simms and Sandy Burris reappeared.

"Want to talk to you, Teague," Cotton said.

"All right," Teague said, following the two men out of the house. The grizzled puncher led Teague around behind the empty corral. Dour-faced Sandy Burris followed wordlessly.

"You say you came from up north around Pecos?" Cotton grunted.

"Yeah, and from New Mexico before that. Can't seem to stay hitched for long."

"Did you ever hear of Jim Fenton up around Pecos? He's Miss Julie's brother."

TEAGUE shook his head. Cotton was silent for a moment, then said gruffly:

"I just thought maybe you might have."

Teague drew his pocket-knife absently, and started whittling on a piece of wood. He could feel Cotton's keen eyes on him when the grizzled puncher spoke again.

"Long as you're going to ride with us, I reckon you might as well know the worst. I suppose you know Miss Julie's pappy was killed a few weeks ago. She thinks he got thrown by his horse, but he wasn't. He was shot in the back. One of Webber's hired gunhawks did it, I reckon, but you couldn't prove it. We aren't tellin' Miss Julie, though."

Teague looked up quickly. "Gosh sakes, no!" he said.

"None of us have ever seen her brother, though she talks about him most of the time. He's all she's got except the three of us. We stuck by her when the time came that she couldn't pay wages. Sandy here says he's just a plain fool for hangin' around, but you couldn't get him to leave. Me, I'm just an old fossil, and would fall apart if I had to ride more than a couple of hours at a time.

"Then there's Bret Laird—he's in love with Miss Julie, but too scared to tell her. Bret is up to Pecos tryin' to find her brother. He ought to be back any day now."

"What about this Webber, and his gun-sharps?" Teague drawled. "What's their game?"

Cotton growled sourly. "Webber wants the F dash. We got plenty of

water and good range, and he wants it. He bought a note that the bank had been holdin' against the F Dash, and now he's goin' to foreclose if Miss Julie don't pay. We had all of the F Dash cattle bunched on the north range. We aimed to sell 'em, but they were drove off. Webber's probably behind it, only he's too smart to leave a trail. The whole herd just disappeared in thin air—leavin' never a track. That just about puts us where Webber wants us."

Sandy Burris spoke up dryly.

"Reckon you didn't make Webber very happy when you rode up today, the way Miss Julie tells it."

Teague chuckled softly.

"Reckon you're wrong there. He thinks I'm Jim Fenton, and maybe I've got enough money to upset his plans. Said he'd be back Saturday, and acted like he was plumb itching to meet me again."

Cotton Simms growled gloomily. "Itchin' is right. Only it's his trigger finger, an' he'll bring plenty of help."

CHAPTER III

"Hello, Killer!"

JUST after sunrise, two days later Slim Teague climbed into the saddle of his shaggy mare, and turned his head in the direction of Sun Ridge.

"Goin' to look for the herd you boys lost," he drawled in answer to Cotton's questing growl.

Teague had never been on the north range, and knew of it only from bits of information he had managed to worm out of Cotton and the taciturn Sandy Burris. The lanky lawman's eyes were moody as he gave the mare its head along the side of the ridge. Somewhere in the rolling valley below, three hundred head of cattle had disappeared scarcely ten days ago.

"Just plain hopped off of the earth," Cotton Simms had said. "They were bedded down that night, and gone the next mornin'. There's plenty of draws and gulches cuttin' away from the valley, and we searched every one of 'em. We even rode up to the head of the valley to Cash Webber's line fence, and found never a sign. The ground up in the valley is hard and grassy. That night we had a terrible rain, but, hang it, that many dogies should have kicked up a trail somewhere."

Teague's lips puckered thoughtfully as he rode. Cotton had missed something somewhere. Three hundred cattle couldn't be moved without leaving some sort of sign.

The trail the shaggy mare was following angled precariously along the steep slope of the ridge. Why he followed the high trail, Teague did not know, except that it gave him a good view of a country with which he wasn't familiar. It was a habit of caution that had been born of traveling many dangerous trails.

Toward the head of the valley four or five miles distant he could see the white face of upcropping rock marking the F Dash's boundary line. From there spread Cash Webber's Circle W. Webber's south range took in either side of the valley owned by Julie Fenton, even sweeping back to the badlands Cotton Simms said was on the opposite side of the ridge.

Teague halted his mare in the shade of a scrubby tree, and squinted his eyes against the afternoon sun that was still high in the cloudless sky. On the far side of the valley he could make out the gulches and draws branching into rolling foothills.

If the F Dash punchers had searched the draws and gulches leading off of the valley, then they must have paid little attention to the steep ridge that reared on the east side.

Teague kneed his horse into movement again. A single thought kept working back into his mind. The side of the ridge was steep, too steep for cattle to be driven up easily.

"Maybe that's what Webber had in mind," Teague muttered to himself.

"He's a cunning devil if there ever was one. If he sets his mind to it, I'd bet a penny he'd push those dogies up this hill whether they wanted to or not. And he's got enough men. That hard rain would have washed their tracks plumb off of the slope."

A small blaze of white down near the foot of the ridge caught Slim Teague's alert eyes. He neck-reined the mare down the slope, and pulled up near a small stand of cottonwoods.

The spot of white he had seen came from the stump of a freshly-cut young cottonwood. It was a small tree, laying well back in the grove. The upper limbs were torn, dirty, tangled with twigs and dead grass. The lawman's eyes settled on a narrow ring near the butt of the tree where the bark had been rubbed off.

"Smart," he mused. "Webber is smart. He didn't take any chances of the rain not coming. He cut down a small tree, and dragged it around to smear up the tracks of the cows. Reckon the other side of the ridge might be a good place to look into."

He was about to turn his horse back up the slope when he saw the mare's ears lift. Teague's eyes narrowed, followed the horse's stare.

Nearly opposite him on the other side of the valley a lone rider was coming out of a draw. The lawman pulled his mount farther back into the cottonwoods. The rider hadn't seen him, and was heading straight out toward the middle of the valley.

QUIETLY Teague's hand crept back to his battered Colt, as he waited. Scarcely a quarter mile away, the rider swung his mount down a trail that led toward the F Dash ranchhouse. Teague noted the slouch of his rangy frame, the slow plod of the horse he rode. Evidently the rider had been in the saddle long.

Suddenly a sharp crack of a rifle split the silence. It came from somewhere up the slope from the watching lawman. Teague saw the lone rider lurch up stiffly in his stirrups, then relax and slide to the ground.

The lawman breathed a soft curse, and slapped his mare through the cottonwoods. Into the open, he twisted around in the saddle, jerking up his six-gun. He got a quick glimpse of a rifleman on the crest of the ridge, framed against the blue of the sky.

Teague's gun buckled in his hand once, then again. Then the startled killer jabbed spurs into his horse, and faded back over the lip of the ridge.

It was a short quarter mile to where the fallen man lay, and Slim Teague made it at a dead run. He pulled the mare up to a bunch-footed halt, and dropped to the ground beside the wounded man.

He was alive, but unconscious. An ugly gash along the back of his head flowed red. Teague wadded a handkerchief, and padded it over the wound. Then he slid his hands under the man's body, and picked him up easily. It cost more of an effort to get him into the saddle, but he managed it by letting the wounded man hang over the horse's neck while he climbed into the kak. Then he rode off at a quick trot for the ranchhouse.

Julie Fenton was standing in the doorway when Teague rode up. She screamed, and ran up as the lanky rider drew up in front of the bunkhouse. Cotton Simms hopped through the door of the bunkhouse with his shirt tail out, and a six-gun in his gnarled fist.

"Who's hurt?" Cotton bawled, as he saw the wounded man.

The girl saw the unconscious man's face. "It's Bret! And he's been shot."

Teague slid from the saddle still holding the wounded man in his arms. Cotton Simms stepped up in front of him, a strange look in his faded blue eyes.

"How'd it happen?" he growled.

Teague's arms ached dully, and his temper was short.

"Get out of the way, Cotton," he snapped, "and quit asking fool questions. Get some water. This feller may be hurt bad."

Julie Fenton was hovering alongside him as he pressed through the door of the bunkhouse and laid the man down

on a cot. She knelt beside him, whimpering softly. Suddenly she straightened, her face white and tear streaked.

"Murderers!" she gritted. "That's what they are. They've killed him!"

Then she was suddenly calm, and worked with swift fingers over the wounded man. Slim Teague watched quietly as she washed the wound clean, then padded it with clean, white bandage. It wasn't a deep wound, and the rangy young cowpuncher would be on his feet within a few days.

Teague turned and found Cotton Simms staring at him with that same strange look in his eyes. Sour-faced Sandy Burris stood just outside the door.

Teague pushed by them to the wash basin on the stand outside, and splashed cold water over his sweaty face. The grizzled puncher followed behind, his shirt tail flapping.

"How did it happen?" Cotton repeated gruffly.

Teague turned, mopping his face with an already-wet towel.

"I was up near Sun Ridge when this young feller rode out of the draws on the other side of the valley. I waited, wondering who he was, when someone opened up with a rifle from the top of the ridge behind me. I got a quick look at the skunk, then he sloped."

THE grizzled man growled: "I thought you were lookin' for tracks. What were you doin' over by the ridge?"

Teague's eyes dropped to the six-gun still dangling in Cotton's fist, then raised to Sandy Burris who stood silently at one side. Hot anger suddenly flared in Teague's lanky body.

"So you think maybe I was in on it, huh?" he bridled. "You think maybe I gunned him, then brought him here for you to fix up?"

He broke off, staring coldly at the two F Dash punchers.

"We don't know you from Adam," Sandy Burris drawled. "It just looks funny, that's all."

"Just like one of Webber's tricks," Cotton grumbled.

Teague found himself sliding into a loose crouch. He straightened stiffly, and a cold smile curled his lips.

"Reckon you got reason enough to think I'm a spy," he snapped. "Well, I'll tell you what I was doing at the ridge. I was finding something you two thick-headed fools couldn't find. I found out where that herd went."

He spun on his heel and stalked off to his sweaty mare. He was pulling off the saddle when Cotton Simms slapped a rough hand down on his shoulder.

"Forget it, son," he said gruffly. "I'm just a cantankerous old fool. Sandy and I both get ringy when it comes to seeing Miss Julie hurt."

Teague turned grinning. The hot flare had died out, and he took Cotton's offered hand with a quick grip.

"You say you found out where the cattle went?" Cotton asked.

"Yeah," Teague drawled dryly, "over the ridge."

Cotton's pale eyes widened.

"Well, I'll be switched! But they couldn't have been driven over the ridge. We thought it was too steep. We'll show that skunk Webber a thing or two. We'll ride over and rustle that herd right back here again."

Teague chuckled softly. "Yeah, just the three of us will do that. And get smoked up by some of Webber's killers. Count me out. I'm too young to die for nothing."

After supper, Teague took a walk to the little creek that bubbled through a grove of cottonwoods a quarter mile from the ranchhouse. Bret Laird was still unconscious, and Julie Fenton hovered over him anxiously. Cotton and Sandy sat gloomily outside the bunkhouse.

Teague dropped to the ground beside the creek. His single meeting with Cash Webber had made him feel that the giant rancher was too smart to be guilty of rustling, let alone stealing an entire herd.

Not that Webber hadn't driven the herd over the ridge to his own range—Teague had no doubt but that the thick-lipped ranchman had been behind that.

Webber wanted the F Dash range; he wanted Julie Fenton; but he was too smart to make a move that might bring the sheriff down on his head.

More probably Webber had driven off the herd with the idea of making the F Dash riders think it had been rustled. And with the herd gone, Julie Fenton's only means of meeting the note would be gone. And even if the cattle were found on the Circle W range, it couldn't be proved that Webber had driven them there. Cattle might wander to any unfenced range, and it wasn't rustling unless brands were changed.

The afterglow of sunset died, and darkness settled in. Teague rose and walked back toward the ranchhouse. They would have to get the cattle back if Julie Fenton was to meet the note. Tomorrow was Saturday, the last day for payment.

SOFTLY Teague cursed under his breath. Three men couldn't drive off the cattle. Not if Webber had his hired killers guarding the Circle W boundary line. And even if they did break through, the herd had probably been stampeded into the badlands. If that was the case, it would take days to round them up again.

A voice that was strange to the lanky lawman halted Teague just outside the door of the bunkhouse. A glance through the window showed Bret Laird sitting up weakly on the cot. He was talking in a low, strained voice that drifted clearly to Teague's ears.

"I—I tell you I saw it all. I was back in a corner of the saloon when the gent walked in. Jim was standing with his back to the bar, like he was waitin' for someone to show up. I didn't recognize Jim at the time. He was heavier than the picture on Miss Julie's mantel. Jim and the other gent saw each other at the same time. Jim didn't say anything, just drew fast as lightning. I'd swear the other feller's hands had been empty when he came in, but a gun was there before Jim could pull the trigger. I'm sorry, Miss Julie, but yore brother is dead!"

A warm shiver rippled down Slim Teague's lean frame. He breathed a soft, bitter curse. He had wanted to tell the girl who he was, what had happened, but it had seemed best to wait until after the showdown with Webber. Now she knew her brother was dead, and the moment he entered the bunkhouse she would know who had killed him.

His hand brushed over the badge pinned inside the flap of his shirt pocket, then dropped back to his side. No, not that way. Telling her that he was deputy U.S. marshal, that her brother had been a notorious bandit, would only be adding to her pain. It would be better to go in and trust that Bret Laird wouldn't recognize him. The saloon in Pecos had been smoke filled and badly lighted.

Teague crossed to the doorway and stepped inside. Sandy Burris, sour-faced, silent, was leaning back against the wall a couple of yards away.

He nodded wordlessly as Teague entered.

Cotton turned his grizzled head at the sound of Teague's footsteps. Julie Fenton flashed him a misty eyed glance.

"Come here, son," Cotton said gruffly. "Bret has come to, and he tells us Jim Fenton has been killed. Bret, here's the man who saved your life."

Teague smiled coolly as Bret turned his pain bleached face. He saw the wounded man's eyes widen, saw his lips twist in bitter lines.

"Saved me, huh?" Bret Laird rasped. "Hello, killer. Maybe you're the man who shot me."

Julie Fenton gasped. "Bret! Please! He's Slim Teague."

Laird laughed hoarsely. "Teague? Sure. And he's the skunk who killed your brother!"

Strained silence suddenly gripped the little bunkhouse. Cotton's face froze in wrinkled hardness; Sandy Burris pushed stiffly away from the wall. The girl only stared in bitter reproach.

Teague stepped forward swiftly. "Wait a minute," he cried. "Let me explain!"

Sandy Burris' lean frame moved in

flashing action. Teague ducked frantically to one side, but not far enough to escape the balled fist that swept up toward his chin. The fist jarred against his jaw, splattering roaring lights over his brain. Julie Fenton's pale face dissolved before his eyes, and he pitched forward into black nothingness.

CHAPTER IV

Gunhawk's Trap

YELLOW sunlight, slanting downward in a thin sheet from a crack in a barred window, fell over Slim Teague's closed eyes, and brought him into consciousness. The lanky lawman's eyes fluttered open, then they closed as the light kindled stabbing pain in his head.

He lay quietly for a moment, recalling fragments of what had happened. Sunlight! Then it was morning—Saturday—the day Webber was to return.

Teague jerked into a sitting position, and shoved dizzily to his feet. The room, murky, half-lighted, swam crazily before his eyes. He reeled over to the closed door. Locked. He cursed sourly, and weaved along the wall to the window. A single glance told him escape was impossible that way. Those shutters over the window were heavy, well-braced, built years before to withstand the raids of marauding bandits who had swept up from the Border. They had been nailed from the outside.

Teague's eyes lifted to the low roof. Once up in Cheyenne he had heard of a man escaping jail by ripping a hole in the roof. He chuckled drily, as he saw the wide-spaced sheathing, the slabs of wooden shingles.

The momentary wave of dizziness had passed. Now he decided to try escaping. Moving rapidly, he picked up a chair, and leaped to the top of a table sitting in the middle of the room. Three smashing blows with the chair tore a hole through the shingles. Half a dozen more jarred one of the sheathing boards loose. Ten minutes later he worked his lean frame through a hole in the roof and dropped to the ground outside.

The end of the long bunkhouse shut off view of the ranchhouse. Teague broke into a run toward the end of the building. His Colt had been taken from him, but he remembered the heavy Sharps resting in the deer horns above the fireplace. An instant later he slid to an abrupt halt, and leaped back behind the corner of the bunkhouse.

The sagging fence in front of the squatty ranchhouse was lined with a dozen or so horses. Several hard-faced men lounged in the shade of their horses.

Chaos flooded Slim Teague's brain. That white-faced roan near the gate belonged to Cash Webber. It was the same horse that had been tethered at the fence when Teague had ridden up three days ago.

The lawman's eyes slitted. His long fingers slid down to the empty holster at his hip. Gunless, it would be suicide to show himself to Webber's hired killers. And yet something must be done!

A short, high pitched scream ripped over the morning air. Slim Teague whirled, and ran back toward the corral that sprawled behind the bunkhouse. His saddle and blanket still lay over the saddle-rack where he had put them. Cotton's, Sandy's and Bret Laird's were gone.

Swift anger raced through Slim Teague's veins. The heedless fools! They had left Julie Fenton alone while they rode in a foolhardy attempt to drive back the lost herd. Left the girl when they knew thick-lipped Webber would gloat over the chance of catching her alone.

The corral stretched around to the unpainted shed just behind the ranchhouse. Teague slipped between the heavy rails, and broke into a crouching run for the shed.

He drew up behind the shed, then trotted tensely to the rear door of the ranchhouse. The door was half open,

and he pressed through grimly, and halted just inside the kitchen.

FROM down the hallway leading to the living room, Slim Teague heard Julie Fenton's low, strained voice.

"Cash Webber you'll—you'll pay for that!"

Teague heard Webber's harsh laugh. "Hear that, Silver? One kiss, and she's yellin'. You got me wrong, Julie. I'm not so hard to take. There's no use to fight, because I always get what I want. And I want you."

"Bret will kill you when he finds out about this."

"Hear that, Sliver?" Cash Webber's laughter boomed out. "She's sweet on Bret Laird. She's going to sic him on us. And he gone to town after the sheriff. What does he aim to do, Julie, run us off our own ranch? We're takin' it over at noon. Or maybe this gunslick who calls himself your brother has the money, huh?"

Teague heard the girl's bitter laugh. "Him? You ought to know all about him. But there's something you don't know. We've found the cattle you drove off."

Cash Webber exploded hoarsely. "What?"

"Bret's doing just what you said. He's bringing the sheriff to run you off of my ranch. And he's also bringing a buyer for the cattle. You'll get your money in time, Mr. Webber."

Standing inside the kitchen Teague smiled thinly. He heard the low drone of men's voices, and a moment later Webber's strident command.

"Sliver, you and Chunky stay here and see that the girl don't try to slope. The rest of us are ridin'. By heaven, I'll show her. She can't sell cattle if she can't find 'em. We'll smoke out her two waddies, and stampede the dogies so's it'll take a month to round 'em up."

Teague heard Webber's heavy boots clump out of the house, followed by a booming order and the clatter of hoofs. Then all was silent, save for the girl's strained breathing, and a coarse laugh from one of the killers.

A long moment dragged by. Slim Teague had stolen to the closed kitchen door, where he crouched, racking his brain for a way to get the drop on the two killers. If he had a gun he wouldn't have hesitated to stalk out to meet them. But weaponless, such an act would be futile.

Suddenly he heard one of the killers rasp in a hoarse voice.

"She's good-lookin', isn't she, Sliver? Wonder if the boss would get touchy if—"

Sliver cut in with a thin, grating voice. "Leave her be, Chunky. She's Webber's woman."

Teague heard slow footsteps.

"Aw, he'll never know. I just want one of those kisses she's so stingy with. Hey! Don't try to run, you little spitfire; it won't do any good."

Teague's eyes slitted dangerously. He was reaching for the door knob when he heard running steps in the hallway. He pressed back to the wall as the kitchen door crashed back.

He got a flash of Julie Fenton's white face as she ran from the man who followed, laughing coarsely. Then the girl struck the side of the table, stumbled to the floor. Chunky, his round face set in a gloating grin, pushed into the room.

Behind the door, Teague's lean muscles hardened. He swung the door shut silently, saw surprise and fleeting hope widen the girl's eyes as she recognized him.

Chunky was chuckling hoarsely. "Spunky, huh? That's the way I like 'em!"

Then Teague's long legs propelled him forward in a swift, silent lunge. His balled fist lifted, chopped down savagely on the back of the killer's neck. The gunman half turned, met a punch that carried all the weight of the lawman's lean shoulders. Chunky slumped wordlessly to the floor.

JULIE FENTON was at Teague's side as he jerked the gun from the killer's holster.

"You!" she breathed. "How did you get free?"

Teague clamped a hand over her

mouth. "Shut up!" he snapped. "Tie up this man, and do a good job of it; we got to work fast."

Gun in hand, he turned, pulled the kitchen door open, and stalked down the short hallway. The gunman in the living room heard his approaching footsteps, looked up as Teague stood in the doorway.

Swift recognition flooded the killer's wizened face with amazement. He coiled in a tight crouch, dark eyes muddy, unfocused. He was a killer all the way through, poisonous, eager, dangerous even in the face of Teague's leveled Colt.

"Careful, Sliver," Teague drawled softly.

The killer's mouth curled in a thin-lipped leer.

"Careful, yeah," he gritted, "that's your job. You smashed my face and no man ever did that and lived!"

Kill crazy, that's what he was. Teague recognized it in the man's muddy eyes, even as Sliver's right hand swooped hipward in a gun-fast draw. The lanky lawman triggered a single shot from his Colt, saw the killer's head snap back as the heavy slug bored into the middle of his forehead.

Julie Fenton ran into the room to see Teague peering through wisps of powder smoke at the dead gunman.

"Oh!" she cried. "So he's the one who's hurt!"

Slim Teague looked at her coolly. "Scared maybe he got me, Miss Julie?"

Her lips tightened angrily. "It wouldn't have mattered; you were two of a kind. The only difference is that he was only a killer, while you came here pretending to be someone else."

Teague jammed the Colt into his holster. "Now look here, Miss Julie—"

At that moment from up the north valley, there came the faint rattle of gunfire. Teague's words broke off tensely. He ran out on the front porch with the girl, pale faced, following close behind.

Julie Fenton uttered a brittle scream. "It's Cotton! And he's hurt."

Teague whirled and pushed her back into the house. He faced her coldly, tall, grim-faced, gaunt in patched levis and a faded blue shirt. An impatient gesture of his bronzed hand shoved his shapeless hat back on unruly yellow hair. A faint bruise on the side of his lean jaw marked the spot where Sandy Burris' fist had landed the night before.

His slow, taunting drawl was gone, and he spoke in hard, clipped words.

"Now, listen, girl, and forget whatever ideas you've got about me for a while. Webber's overplayed his hand; even you may not get out of this alive now. Is that polecat in the kitchen tied?"

She nodded.

"How long before Laird should be back with the sheriff?"

"Almost any time now, but if you think you're going to make up for killing my brother—"

Another burst of gunfire, closer now, crashed across the morning air. Teague pushed the girl to one side, dived to the fallen killer and pulled the six-gun from dead fingers. He shoved the gun under his belt, leaped to the deer horns over the mantel and lifted the heavy Sharps free. His lean face a hard, emotionless mask, he lurched to the front door as a horse pounded up outside the house.

HE was waiting just inside the door when Cotton Simms, the side of his grizzled face streaked with sweat and blood, staggered into the room. A six-gun was clamped in the puncher's gnarled right fist.

"Miss Julie," Cotton Simms yelped hoarsely. "There's trouble a-poppin'! Webber, he—" Then he saw Slim Teague's rangy frame. "You—so it's you, too!"

His gun swept up with savage deadliness. Fast. Teague faded to one side, slid in close as the weapon belched death almost in the lawman's face. Then Slim Teague's fist chopped across the grizzled man's jaw.

"Take his gun," he snapped to the girl. "And don't hesitate to use it when the time comes."

He stepped out on the porch as a dozen gun-thirsty riders thundered up to the fence in front of the ranchhouse.

Cash Webber was first to see the man on the front porch. His voice lifted in strident fury.

"That buzzard on the porch! Fan out, you gun-hawks, and earn your pay. I want that feller's ears!"

They left their mounts in flying dives, scuttling to take advantage of the least cover that offered. One man, skinny, with long, bowed legs, reared up from behind the fence, and thumbed a shot that burned the air a foot from Teague's head.

The heavy Sharps jerked to waist level in Teague's hand. He squeezed the trigger, saw the skinny man knocked backward under the impact of the heavy slug.

Then he swung it in a slow arc, levering shells into the chamber, tugging on the trigger every time he got a glimpse of a furtive movement.

A man near the fence gate squirmed uncomfortably. Teague blasted a shot that exploded the fence rail in splinters. The man rolled into view, clawing at his torn, bloody face.

A hail of slugs ripped through the air around the rangy lawman. One ricocheted from the rifle barrel, and burned along his arm. Another one smashed into his right side, knocking him to his knees.

He dropped the Sharps to the floor, and rolled to one side, drawing both Colts.

SUDDENLY he was aware that a six-gun was booming through a window behind him.

Teague got a fleeting look at Julie Fenton, white-faced, coppery hair dishevelled, crouching over a smoking gun.

A thin grin found Teague's lips. He rolled off of the porch so that he could get free view of the ground in front of him.

Fight! The word churned through his veins with savage heat.

His guns broke into a drumming roll—slow, rhythmic, deadly. Cash Webber was shielding himself behind his horse, firing over the saddle then ducking back out of sight. But his legs showed and Teague slammed a slug into them, and then laughed harshly as the big man screamed and went down.

The lawman then centered his eyes on Webber's thick chest, saw twin clouds of dust rise from Webber's shirt front as both guns bucked in his hands. A curtain of red was slowly lowering over Teague's eyes. He fought it back stubbornly.

His guns were still hammering when Bret Laird thundered up with the sheriff's posse.

BRET LAIRD and a new Julie Laird were standing a few paces behind Teague.

"Hey, you, where do you think you are going, sneakin' out like this?"

Slim Teague looked around sheepishly from the shaggy red mare he had just finished saddling.

"Yes, where do you think you're going?" the girl repeated.

Teague dropped his eyes uncomfortably, and scraped the toe of his worn boot in the dirt.

He glanced at his patched levis, at the rip that was in the sleeve of his faded blue shirt.

"Thought I'd go look for a job," he drawled lamely. "Sandy will soon be well and in the saddle again."

The girl stepped forward, her hand outstretched holding a small badge.

"I know everything," she said softly, "we found this in your pocket, and the sheriff told us—about Jim. I suppose a deputy U. S. Marshal has lots of jobs to take care of."

Smiling coolly, Teague took the badge.

He climbed into the saddle slowly, favoring a bullet scrape that he had received during the fight.

Back near a fenced-off cattle pen a hundred yards away, Cotton Simms turned from where he had been staring at the bawling animals, and yelled in a heavy voice.

"Hey, you long-legged galoot! You can't ride off yet. Come here and help me count these cows. Danged if I don't think one of 'em had a calf while they were on Cash Webber's range."

Dead Man's REPRIEVE

As Ace reached for his shoulder-holster, Sheriff Potter's hand dipped for his gun

By DUPREE POE

Told he has only six months to live, Sheriff Lem Potter decides to spend the time cleaning up rip-roaring Sweetland. . . .

SHERIFF LEM POTTER heard the death sentence pronounced on him.

"You're hittin' the bottle too much, Doc," he said. "You're as drunk as a boiled owl right now. You can't see straight. I don't aim to die!"

Doc Wheeler used the most modern and scientific methods in his business, charts and gadgets that left nothing to chance. He usually kept sober enough to know what he was doing. This morning, Lem swore, a man might have fired the doctor's breath with a match.

The doctor took another look at the chart, just to be sure. "I'll give you six months, Lem, with that heart of yours. The chart doesn't lie."

Those wheezy words exploded in Lem's mind like a sudden crash of mountain thunder. His craggy old face felt cold. His parchment-like skin was damp. He pulled his lanky frame to full height and gave the doctor a fixed, blue-eyed stare. A man as sinful as Lem Potter couldn't afford to die! Six months wasn't enough time for him to right all the wrongs he had done!

He glared at his boss, old Bob Biggs, who was also here to get a report on a recent physical examination. Bob's thin face twisted like a squeezed lemon. He looked just as sour. If there was a man alive who was responsible for all the mean things Sheriff Lem had done to pore folks, there he stood!

"We can't afford to bury my sheriff like some sick calf in the next six months!" Bob Biggs declared. "I need him bad, Doc. You do something!"

Old Bob Biggs toted the county political power in his hip pocket, but it always had riled Lem Potter to have the oldster speak as though the county sheriff were his personal hired hand. For more than twenty years, Bob Biggs had thought and talked like that, but now the sheriff he had hand-picked for the job was practically dying on his feet! There was nothing the doctor could do for a man like Lem Potter, because Doc said so himself, but there was a-plenty a God-fearing sheriff could do to right the wrongs he had done!

"When it comes election next fall, you can hand-pick you another sheriff to do your dirty work," he said. "Because I'll be a dead man!"

Bob Biggs snorted, fumed and cussed a blue streak.

The doctor took a look at the chart he had made for Bob Biggs. Solemn as an owl, he said: "You're as sound as a new silver dollar, Bob. Nothing wrong with you at all." Then, he took a swig from the bottle on the table.

Lem Potter wished his boss no hard luck, but it seemed kind of unfair for such a wealthy old cuss to enjoy such good health, while a weary, hard-working lawman stood there practically dying on his feet. Lem's eyes chilled.

"Well dang it, Lem, if you aim to die on me in the next six months," Bob Biggs rumbled, "you might as well be some use to me in the mean time! You hike down to the courthouse lawn and chouse that nester outfit plumb out of my county. You do it pronto, Lem, you hear me!"

YESTERDAY, Lem Potter might have jumped to obey. Now, he stood his ground defiantly. The danged cough that had brought him to the office yesterday for a physical examination took hold of him now. It was a persistent ailment. It tore at him, and he almost bent double, coughing. He figured he'd been smoking too much and caught a little cold, but he reckoned Doc Wheeler knew best.

Lem didn't surmise that his old heart was acting up on him. It had never given him any trouble. But the verdict was in, and he was doomed to die!

The thought that Death hovered so close to him made him feel plumb pious. Yep, he was a free man now. He didn't need the sheriff's job or old Bob Biggs' support at election time. He didn't have to take orders from any man. He was sheriff of the county and he could enforce the law, fair and square, for the next six months. Maybe that might wipe away some of the mean things he'd done for old Bob Biggs during the past twenty years. It seemed the cantankerous old son wanted to get everything out of a dying lawman that was left in him!

"It's about time the county growed some and filled up with settlers," he announced flatly. "I've been chousin' nesters long enough, Bob."

Bob Biggs exploded an oath and looked amazed. He shook his cane at the sheriff. "Why, dang your soul!" he roared. "You'll do what I say—else, there'll be another sheriff, come election time!"

Lem decided to go out whole-hog now. His craggy face hardened. "I'll be a dead man, come election, but for the next six months, I'll be the law!"

Bob Biggs dropped weakly into a chair and looked like a man shot through the heart. He went blue in the face and gasped for breath. He was so weak and angry he could not talk. Doc Wheeler administered a swig from the bottle, and some of the life poured back into the scrawny old cattleman.

"I've been bossed around by you for twenty years or more," Lem Potter said. "I don't aim to be bossed no more on this sheriffin' job. For the next six months, I'll give the county the kind of law it ought to have had for twenty years!"

He thought of those three ragged, lean-faced kids and and the worn woman down there on the courthouse lawn with the gaunt old nester and the broken wagon. One of their horses was sick, and he had given them until sundown to hit the trail for another county.

"I'm goin' down there and tell them nesters to homestead a place on Willow Crick!" he declared. "They're honest settlers, the kind we need hereabouts!"

He turned toward the door, hearing old Bob's blistering oaths behind him. He moved down the sidewalk, ramrod stiff and determined. For the first time

in twenty years, he felt a great weight lifted from him. That badge on his chest meant something. It was a symbol of equality, justice and square-dealing.

Lem reached the nester outfit and astonished the gaunt old man by saying: "You folks stay here until that hoss is all right. Then, you'd ought to look around along Willow Crick for a location that'll suit you. If anybody bothers you, just call on me. I'll see you're left alone, even if I've got to personally gun-whip every cowman in the county. I'm the *law*, mister!"

Yesterday, Lem Potter had been a well-trained dog. Today, he felt like a lion of righteousness, roaring through the streets to defend poor, weak folks from the injustice of the mighty. He stormed into the courthouse and found his six fat deputies lounging around the sheriff's office over a game of poker.

"All right, you dad-blamed loafers," he bellowed. "Things have changed a lot around this county. Give me them badges and git out of here! We don't need no parasites on the county payroll hereafter!"

Then, he stood alone in the office, with those six glittering lawmen's badges on the desk before him. For a moment, he was slightly scared at what he had done. Those six men he had sent packing were the vote-getters of the county machine controlled by Bob Biggs. They didn't have much lawing to do in a peaceful county. Their job was to ride the range and keep in touch with the voters, and to report any rebellious attitude among the citizenry to their boss. Come election time, those deputies took charge of the polls. Any one of them had the ability to stand there blindfolded and tell which votes to count and which to throw in the trash barrel. With those six varmints in charge of an election, the outcome might be questionable, but it was never uncertain!

Sheriff Lem went outside and saw those six men still standing beside their horses near a rack under a big cottonwood tree.

He drew his guns and fired two shots over their heads.

"My gosh, he's gone plain loco!" one of the ex-deputies cried, swinging into saddle. "He's too danged important to kill, and too blamed mean to stop!"

"Git plumb. out of my county!" Sheriff Lem ordered.

PEOPLE gathered on the sidewalks and watched those six gun-deputies hit the trail. A spiral of dust rose over the riders as they headed for the county line, riding hard and fast. Lem Potter turned his hawkish gaze on the Owl Saloon. With measured strides, he crossed the street. Amazed townsmen and range-garbed men from the ranches gave way before him. He paused a moment.

"We can do with fewer honkytonks here in Sweetland county, and a danged sight less gamblin' and drinkin'," Lem Potter declared. "This town has been wide open for twenty years, and it's drawn outlaws and killers like flies to honey. And the law around here ain't lifted a hand to stop 'em!"

Old Bob Biggs might have replied that vice was a necessary evil in the cow country. Vice kept cowboys happy and gambling kept them broke enough to stay on the job. The outlaws were welcome, too, because if nobody bothered them in Sweetland County, they would spend their money there, then go to other places to do their devilment, leaving the range alone.

That was sound argument, and it worked for twenty years. There was no rustling or other stealing in the county, and there were mighty few killings. But the neighboring counties caught rip-roaring blazes from the renegades who holed up at Sweetland. It was about time Sweetland law did something for the neighbors!

Sheriff Lem Potter pushed through the batwings of the Owl Saloon.

Drinkers turned away from the long bar to watch him. He moved with measured stride toward Ace Kiston, who sat at a small table at the rear of the place. The saloonman turned a lean, sallow face up at the lawman. His pale blue eyes were frosty. He beckoned with a hand, irritated by the intrusion, motioning Lem Potter away from the table. The three hard-faced men looked startled.

"It's all right, boys," Ace said softly. "It's just the local law. Nobody needs be afraid in this town." Then, he frowned at the sheriff. "I'm busy," he announced curtly. "Come around some other time, Potter."

Sheriff Lem stood his ground and sized up that crew of ruffians. The hardcases at the table with the saloonman were gents wanted in other counties for robbery and rustling. They were here perhaps planning other crimes with Ace Kiston, but they were small-fry in Sheriff Lem's skillet. He believed in killing a snake by stamping its head. He gave Ace a steady glare.

"You're leavin' town, Ace," he said softly. "I'm runnin' you out myself. Come along, and I'll see you to your horse. Or else, you can stay and die."

Ace's cold eyes blazed with anger. "You're loco, Potter. I've been operating here for twenty years, and I ain't leaving!"

"It's your funeral, Ace!" Lem drawled. "You had your chance."

The tightness of Ace's face indicated that he knew it was showdown confronting him. His right hand reached for the handkerchief in his upper coat pocket. That hand darted toward the bulge of a holdout gun under his left armpit.

Sheriff Lem's right hand dipped for holster and came up with a thundering Colt. The bullet hammered Ace to the floor, snuffing out his life.

Before mid-afternoon, Sheriff Lem Potter had a jailful of renegades. The roads throughout the county were dotted with fleeing gamblers, outlaws, painted women and other evil people. Sheriff Lem felt mighty well pleased with himself. He stood on the courthouse steps, telling a group of good citizens that the town now was the cleanest one in all the state. He intended to keep it that way for as long as he lived.

"We'll have proper saloons where a man can get a drink, and if cowboys or other folks want to gamble a little among themselves, the law will close both eyes," Sheriff Lem promised. "But we'll have no more outlaws, killers and professional blood-suckers around here to rob honest men. I'll see to that!"

Lem felt a hand tugging at his arm. He looked down into Doc Wheeler's stricken face. The little man's lips trembled. "Sheriff, I've made a terrible mistake," he declared in a faltering voice. "I was drinking a lot last night and pretty wobbly this morning. I read Bob Biggs' report to you this morning!"

Sheriff Lem was going to live! A doomed man reprieved from death! All the breath went out of him in a gasp of horror. He had upset the Boss' political machine and just raised Cain in general. Now, he would have no support when election time came. Life had played a dirty trick on him! He was ruined!

BOB BIGGS bore down on the meeting. His face was a cyclone of fury. He waved and threshed his cane in a vicious old hand. Lem Potter trembled.

Then, the townsmen seemed to absorb what the sheriff had told them. Their voices rose in a long, hearty cheer. They whooped it up a-plenty. Those voices told Sheriff Lem Potter that he would have plenty of friends at election time.

Bob Biggs was a mighty smart politician, though. He knew how to turn defeat into victory in a hurry. The cyclone of fury left his craggy face and he stood on the courthouse steps and took his bow beside the Sheriff. Then, he made a short speech to the voters, and they cheered again.

When the cheering stopped, Sheriff Lem looked anxiously at the boss. He said dryly: "Danged your ornery heart, Bob, you're just bound to run this county in spite of all a man can do! Even if you've got to run it honest!"

Bob Biggs grinned like a lobo wolf. In a low whisper, he replied: "Shucks, Lem, when a man knows he's got just six months to live, he don't like to die in disgrace. I reckon you know how pious a man can feel when Death reaches for him? Well, I'm feelin' all the goodness ooze out of me toward the people!"

Lem Potter nodded. He knew all about that pious feeling the boss now had.

Next Issue's Novel: OUTLAWS OF ARIZONA by TOM CURRY

THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 8)

True, there are cattlemen and more cattlemen today. They are as fine a class of men as we have in America, but they are modern, progressive and not at all like the old pioneer cattlemen. That picturesque old type cattleman, those sun-tanned knights of the prairie and saddle, will in a few short years be but a lingering memory of the past. Battles of vaccine against disease, and sometimes legal battles, are the battles of the cattlemen of today, but in those old days it was often a battle of six-guns to enforce one's right to life and prosperity.

All along the trail from the time he was a small boy, Ed did his best to live according to the simple rules of life. Knowing right from wrong, he tried to do the right thing. His word, to anyone who knew him, was as good as a government bond, and he followed his own trail and owned his own brand and outfit, a brand that he could well be proud of and an outfit, while not the largest in the country, that was built up by fair and honest dealings and not by swinging a wide-loop—and he still lives up to his own code of honor.

Arizona Is His Home

With the exceptions of one tour in 1907 with Miller Brothers' 101 Wild West Show and a trip to England in 1924 for the London rodeo, Ed has lived in Arizona and has called it home since he first landed there in 1902.

He was livestock or brand inspector for several years before the racket of cattle rustling by horseback died down. His job was to know every brand and earmark in that part of the cow country. Sometimes he had to know what the real original brand was on the fleshy side of a cow-brute's hide when it differed from the iron on the hairy side. There were still brand-blotters left in Arizona in those days, and Ed's job was to enforce the laws of the cattle range. He had obeyed those laws himself and was relentless in trailing those who disobeyed them, and trailing cattle thieves has always been dangerous work.

He was Sheriff of Pima County for ten years. His straightforward manner in letting the lawless element know that he was after them and that sooner or later he would have the goods on them and close in, ran some of them out of the country. Others paid for their misdeeds the hard way.

However, Ed Echols was a tolerant peace officer, and he always preferred to give good sound advice to those who might be just starting on a career of crime than to arrest them. He kept more than a few men out of the pen by heading them off before they broke the laws.

How many narrow escapes Ed has had during his career as a peace officer, no one knows but Ed, and he won't talk of his own deeds, true to the code of the really great western lawmen. Ed will sit for hours and tell of the brave deeds of other lawmen without ever a mention of his own name. He did admit that he was around the office when John Dillinger, Pierpoint, Macklen and Clark, all of the Dillinger gang, were arrested in Tucson. That was before Dillinger was transferred to Crown Point, Indiana, from where he later escaped and launched a crime wave that made the headlines of all the papers until he was finally tracked down and killed.

John Slaughter

Ed knew Billy Breakenridge intimately, and was a great friend of the famous old lawman Jeff Milton. He worked on a neighboring ranch near the ranch of John Slaughter and knew him well. Of course, that was after Slaughter was Sheriff of Tombstone.

A memorable and very unique character was John Slaughter. Seldom is there so much wrapped up in one human skin. A man of iron will, iron courage, iron determination He was a remarkable combination of thinker and fighter, and it might be said that he had a slightly itchy trigger finger.

Unlike Billy Breakenridge, or Jeff Milton, who would more or less take abuse or try and figure a way to avoid killing a man, it caused Slaughter not the least pain to kill a criminal. He seemed to believe that all criminals should be killed, and he took little chance with them. That is, he was far from being a bring 'em back alive lawman.

He was a grim, impressively silent man, isolated, keeping his own counsels and his own secrets. He asked advice from no one, was quick in making a decision on anything and just as quick to go into action.

John Slaughter was a small but powerful man; broad shoulders, thick of neck, only about five and a half feet in height, black hair, black mustache, black beard and

coal black eyes that seemed to bore right through a fellow and see his soul. He seldom turned his back to anyone and even in conversation with men whom he was sure were his friends, he would not allow them to stand behind him, but always kept his face to those about him. He was generous and genial with his friends, but cold toward his enemies or enemies of the law.

The Lone Wolf Type

Slaughter was not a sheriff to go out in search of criminals with a large posse. He was more of the lone wolf type. He seemed to prefer to go alone. He also seemed to have a special hate for horse thieves, and it is said that he never went out after a horse thief but that he brought back the horse, though he seldom if ever brought back the thief.

A story that illustrates his hatred of horse thieves was first told by a fellow by the name of Jim Wolf, who lived all alone on his little ranch in the San Pedro Valley a few miles south of Charlestown. Wolf said he was working out on his corral one day when a Mexican came along riding a very fine black horse. The horse was so pretty that it caught Wolf's eye and he began trying to trade horses with the Mexican. He kept making his offer a little better each time, but the Mexican was nervous and always looking back in the direction from whence he had come, and before the rancher could really get the fellow interested in a trade he took off in a hurry. In a very few minutes John Slaughter showed up and asked the rancher if he had seen a Mexican ride by on a pretty black horse. The rancher replied that he had and that the Mexican had just a few moments before passed that way. Slaughter also rode off in a hurry as soon as Wolf had pointed out the direction in which the Mexican rode.

About three hours later Slaughter rode into Tombstone with the horse, which had been stolen from his mother-in-law, but no one ever saw the Mexican horse thief. No one asked Slaughter any questions and he never gave any information.

Buzzards Over the Mesquite

About a week later Wolf was riding over in around the mouth of the Bisbee Canon looking for some of his cattle and saw buzzards sailing over a certain spot in the mesquite, so he rode over to investigate, and there was the partially decomposed body of the Mexican horse thief. Like many other men of that time in that country, Wolf knew that it was dangerous to talk about other people's affairs, and so he kept the fact that he had found the body of the Mexican to himself, and several months later there was quite a bit of excitement for a day or so on account of a skeleton being found near the mouth of the Bisbee Canyon.

The bones were brought in. The coroner held an inquest, and returned a verdict that the man whom the skeleton once was came to his death in a manner and from causes unknown. Wolf was in a manner smiling at his own knowledge of the identity of the deceased and the whole affair when he chanced to run into Slaughter, and Slaughter said, "They tell me some punchers found a skeleton over in the mouth of the Bisbee Canon."

"That's what I heard," Wolf replied, "and I'll bet it was just a Mexican horse thief."

With a slight twinkle in his eyes, John Slaughter replied, "I'll bet he never steals another horse," and with that the incident seemed closed.

Slaughter, who practically put the finishing touch to the cleaning out of the lawless element of Tombstone, was not afraid to voice his opinion to anyone. Once when he arrested a Spaniard, Juan Soto, he had what he considered plenty of evidence with which to convict him for being the head of a band of robbers. In spite of the evidence, the jury found Soto not guilty. This made Slaughter so mad that he immediately served notice in person upon Soto that he was giving him ten days in which to wind up his business and leave the country. Otherwise he would kill him.

That of course was taking the law into his own hands, and away from courts and juries, but Slaughter often did things that way. Juan stood his ground for about nine days, but weakened at last and left, and by doing so no doubt saved his own life.

Not With His Boots On!

I enjoyed talking over old times with my old friend Ed Echols, and being unable to get him to say much about himself I talked to others who knew him in Tucson. I only knew him myself from association with him at the many rodeos where he roped.

Friends of Ed tell me that he was never afraid of anything, but his greatest wish was not to die with his boots on, and this probably saved his life, for in 1940, while he was sheriff, he had a hurried call to go out after some criminals, and in speeding

out of Tucson wrecked his car. As he lay gravely injured by the wrecked car, barely conscious, he begged the first person who came to his aid, "Don't let me die with my boots on."

The party began removing Ed's boots and he was rushed to the hospital and there the attending physician said that the removal of the boots, with the pull upon his legs that was necessary in order to remove the footwear, relieved the pressure from an almost shattered spine and saved his life.

During the time between the news of his injury and the announcement of the attending physician that the courageous old sheriff would make the grade, business in Tucson was practically at a standstill, and the topic of conversation all over the section was about the accident, with prayers and hopes for Ed's recovery. I don't know how wealthy Ed Echols is, but I do know that he is one of the richest men in all Arizona if friends and admirers can be counted as wealth. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE simple mention of the name "Geronimo" was enough to send a paralyzing wave of fear through every white person in Arizona—was enough to start stampedes of panic-stricken settlers heading out anywhere—just to get away. The toll of dead, tortured, scalped men and women was impressive enough to give Geronimo a very special place on the list of things feared most by the frontier-settlers.

But there's an old saying, "Give a dog a bad name—" and Geronimo wasn't responsible for every bit of murder, loot and arson for which he was blamed. Certainly he wasn't to blame for a certain raid pulled off on a night when an "Apache moon" hung in the sky.

A little dark body of riders moved down upon a ranchhouse where yellow lamplight stained the windows. Moonlight glinted on the badge pinned to the vest of one of the raiders. He was an officer of the law, a man sworn to uphold justice, to protect the honest from the thieves and the killers.

"Moccasins on, everybody. Keep the horses quiet, Pop," ordered the sturdy guardian of the law. "Fetch a bow and three or four arrows."

Rifle in hand, he started for the build-

[*Turn page*]

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ings, accompanied by two of his men.

"He comes out every night about this time to check up before he sets his sentry," the leader whispered.

"Those waddies will come tearin' out of that bunkhouse," said one of the men.

"We'll have plenty of time," the leader assured him. "He thinks I'm a friend—the law."

A tall figure in range leather and Stetson came out of the house and into the yard, a carbine under his arm.

"Oh, Johnson!" called the sheriff softly.

The carbine snapped to hip firing position, but eased off as the leader added, "It's the sheriff."

Johnson came over. "Why, Cooney, what are you doing around this time of night? I was just making the rounds. Can't take chances with Geronimo on the prowl."

"That's right and it's why I'm here. A bunch of Apaches come through and we're on their trail. Is your brother inside?"

"No, he ain't. Johnny left just after sundown with four of the boys. Who's that with you?" He peered at the other men.

Cooney got him as he leaned forward, off-guard, a crushing blow to the temple with the iron-plated gun butt. Johnson staggered and sank, his grunt dying in his throat as Cooney leaped on him and flattened him out. The other two jumped in to help and long knives flashed. Nobody heard the crunching blows. Their moccasins made no sound, but left, in the soft earth, obvious Indian tracks.

Then Cooney took the Indian bow, fitted a feathered arrow to it and the string twanged. He fired two shafts into Johnson's body and the three murderers withdrew. Another raid by "Geronimo" was ready to go down in history.

Miles away, Johnny Johnson, brother of the murdered man, by some quirk of fate, was actually locked with Geronimo. Under the blazing sun they were forted down under their two canvas-topped wagons, flinging lead at the circling Apaches who ringed them.

And onto this scene rode The Rio Kid and Al Sieber, the famous scout.

"Geronimo!" The Rio Kid spurted forward, shooting rapidly at the Apaches. He recognized the squat, bow-legged chief, naked torso glistening with bear grease, black hair bound with skin. Geronimo was firing a fine new carbine at the wagons.

The Apache chief saw The Rio Kid and Sieber charging down upon them. He could not be sure that these two were not just the advance of a larger party. He gave a signal and immediately the Apaches were streaking west on their wiry mustangs.

Pryor and Sieber rode up to the battle-scarred wagons. A cowboy lay dead by his saddled horse. Another young fellow crouched by a big wheel, nursing a wounded arm. And Johnny Johnson came out to meet the two scouts.

None of these four knew that miles away, Johnson's brother lay dead with Indian arrows bristling from his body, another "victim" of Geronimo. Yet this was the tragedy which was to bind their lives together—and that of Celestino Mireles, who came dashing up—in new adventures of grim and bloody doings. Down through Arizona, where Geronimo left his bloody trail and where white devils surpassed the Indian in cruelty and many times over in greed, the savage doings were to unwind.

This is an action crammed novel of red men and white, called OUTLAWS OF ARIZONA and written by an old friend of yours, Tom Curry. Look forward to it in our next issue!

And that's not all. Our next issue will be another grand, enlarged and improved number—and will also feature two selected novelets of top quality.

First—MANNA FROM TEXAS, a swift and dynamic novelet by Oscar J. Friend, starring two Texas Ranger pards, Trigger Trent and Flash Farrell, in a gripping mining town adventure.

Also—WHILE THE GALLOWS WAIT, a deeply appealing and dramatic novelet of Western justice by Larry A. Harris that will hold you breathless, start to finish! It's a humdinger of a yarn that packs six-gun surprises.

In addition there'll be some fine short stories and all our regular features, including Foghorn Clancy's Bunkhouse, our usual look at stories to come and some very interesting literary efforts in the form of letters by yourselves, our own readers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THAT old mailbag was a little heavy this month, so we're going to keep editorial comment down and try to get in some of the longer letters, which should give you folks quite a bang. Like this hectic missive from our old friend 'Gene Mitchell, who takes one of our authors to task:

I had hoped that I might make a favorable comment regarding Walker A. Tompkins' novel, DEVILS OF DEADWOOD (April

RKWM). But can I help it if Mr. Tompkins won't give me a chance? Following are six reasons why I heartily dislike DEVILS OF DEADWOOD:

1. Too many long and complicated sentences. For heaven's sake, man, give your reader a chance by breaking them up into simpler form.
2. Needless repetition. On page 24 Mr. Tompkins says: "Bob Pryor's eyes drilled through the smoky haze of the Gem Theatre to study the man Hickok had pointed out as the gambler who had used 1876-minted twenty-dollar gold pieces to back his bets, in lieu of gold dust, the Deadwood medium of exchange." The reader is already acquainted with most of these facts; repetition is merely a waste of time and paper. And this isn't the only instance, either. Useless repetition is increasingly evident throughout the novel.
3. Too many one-sentence paragraphs. While there is no grammatical rule against an almost endless flow of one-sentence paragraphs, it doesn't look very nice and it certainly isn't becoming to the author's ability.
4. Contradictory statements. On page 33 Character John McClintrock says, "Outbound coaches never carry a treasure box . . ." On page 42, however, he contradicts this with, "No wonder so many of my gold shipments were nabbed by

[*Turn page*]

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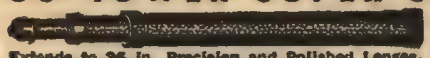

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that gang on the way out of Deadwood." Really, Mr. Tompkins!

5. Needless invention of too many ridiculous words, such as "off-saddle" and "round-sprung." I once knew a Western writer who wasn't satisfied with the ten established methods of referring to a six-shooter, but had to invent two new terms of his own—"smoke-pole" and "death-tube." Needless to say, overuse of these ridiculous terms eventually ruined that author's work. So if you must find substitutes for conventional words, Mr. Tompkins, I suggest you try finding something to replace "and" and "the," two of the most overworked words in the English language.
6. Writing too mechanical, lacking color and flavor.

Reckon that about does it, so I'll pass on to a few comments in Mr. Tompkins' favor:

1. The background of his novels is excellent and would compare favorably with those used by today's best Western authors.
2. He certainly knows what he's talking about, when it comes to historical facts.
3. DEVILS OF DEADWOOD saw a marked absence of mistakes made in previous novels. Is this sign of improvement, Mr. Tompkins?
4. He has written some mighty fine stories in times past. One of these was CURSE OF THE PHANTOM SADDLE, which appeared back in '42 or '43.

One more point before I ride on. I don't know how authentic this is, but it is said that Wild Bill Hickok's last act on earth was to draw both revolvers. Yes sir, even as McCall's bullet sped through his brain, the master gunfighter whipped both Colts from holster! Talk about speed—oh, brother! Bill Bonney raised plenty of sand over in New Mexico, but even he couldn't top that.

Eugene H. Mitchell, Dallas 6, Texas

P.S. No six-shooters, please! I am not a literary critic, and the above is only my honest opinion.

We take violent exception to plenty of Mr. Mitchell's remarks and so do a heap of other readers, which the mail makes plumb clear. We figure Walker Tompkins as one of the most colorful writers of today; we think his stories have more body and flavor than one usually finds and we know he does very careful and exhaustive research on the historical details involved. Naturally, a fiction story is a compromise between strict history and invention—it's got to be so and we always allow some freedom in manipulating facts without which there just couldn't be a story. Now contrary opinion comes in the same mail, as follows:

I've been reading RIO KID WESTERN for more than five years and I think the stories

are getting better all the time. DEVILS OF DEADWOOD is a good example—there's always more excitement in a Tompkins story and a lot more feeling of it being real. Joseph Chadwick is another crackerjack writer, his RAIDERS OF THE IRON TRAIL was the best Rio Kid story you've ever published.

—Martin E. Jensen, Saginaw, Mich.

That's only one of a lot of letters taking exception to Mr. Mitchell's view, but it'll do as a sample, for we haven't got room for them all.

Now here's another echo and a loud one —of that argument started by Shirley Kelley when she asked if The Rio Kid and Celestino couldn't have girl friends.

It seems to me you have left yourself wide open for a correction when you say a wife or sweetheart of the Rio Kid or Celestino certainly couldn't stand the suspense of waiting for their men's next brush with the Grim Reaper. I just wonder what the wife and sweetheart of our Scouts and Frontiersmen did? Didn't they show to the world that the pioneer heroines joined to the tender sympathy and true feminity of their sex the hardier courage and unflinching determination of the sterner one?

Where, in the records of heroic deeds, is one whose lustre outshines that of a woman's love? Didn't Ferdinand DeSoto leave his lovely and noble wife in command of Cuba while he went gallivanting off to loot America in 1538? It was in May, 1542 that DeSoto died. It was still three years later before news of her husband's death reached the noble Donna Anna, and in three days she, too, had passed away, a victim to her grief for one who—whatever may have been his faults in the eyes of others —to her was ever a gallant hero, and the object of her undying devotion.

She is just one of the many brave women whose courage competes with any man's. So where do YOU get that stuff? On what are you basing it on? You will find the weak and the strong as much today as in the years gone by.

A lot of men did—and do—get along all their lives without women fine, but did they—do they—spend that life without at one time or another wishing, or yearning for a woman's

[*Turn page*]

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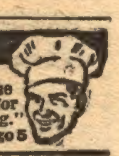

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companionship? I think not no matter what their reasons for picking the life they did—or do. Are you trying to say that any man has such a wonderful control of his will and mind and heart that because he realizes a woman wouldn't fit into his kind of life that he won't fall in love with one? Now we're getting someplace, we don't have a man, we have a machine, who has neither feeling or blood in his veins and who thinks the woman hasn't been made yet who is good enough for him, we won't even call him human.

If we take a man who has lost a wife or sweetheart through death or being jilted—who lives his life alone—we have a human.

I have read the Rio Kid Western a long time, I wouldn't want to change the Rio Kid or Celestino at all. I like them the way they are just fine. But a few of the ideas get me riled and I have let off a little steam about two of them, as you can see. Maybe I've stuck my chin out—but here's one gal that can take it.

—*Glendolyn Rees, Austin, Pa.*

Very nicely put, too, Glen. And while it is true the pioneer woman of other days took a lot of suspense and heartbreak, it is doubtful whether she ever had to take as much of it as the Rio Kid might run into in the course of his career.

Even in the old bad days, a man would be likely to have one big tragic or exciting event in his life—one Indian war or something of the sort. Then things might be peaceful. But not with Bob Pryor. Things are never peaceful around him. It's one battle after another. In that respect maybe he is a machine—a fighting machine; not that he lacks human kindness and emotion, as you know. But there's a difference between fiction and fact, Glen, and after all, the Rio Kid is a fiction character, although many of his companions in this magazine are real characters of the Old West and the stories are as authentic as any you'll find, anywhere.

Still, your spirited defense of the fair (and far from weaker sex) was mighty fine and we plumb enjoyed it.

Now we've still got some letters we'd like to print, but we'll try and get them in next time. So if there's anything you want to get off your chest, just write us a postcard or letter and address it to The Editor, RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. We like praise but we are not afraid of criticism, and we value honest opinions. We're always glad to hear from you. Thanks, and happy reading, everybody!

See you all next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

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*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

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*E. T. Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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